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WINTER'S END

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

GOLD DUST

PITILESS YOUTH

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EDWARD HOLSTIUS.



Winter's End



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TO
GEORGE H. SPILMAN

I

LINDEN TERRACE WAS A cul-de-sac. The fifty-six houses that it contained were dissimilar in three respects: the brass number that was screwed to each front door, the varying heights to which the neighbours raised their respective Venetian blinds, and the individual arrangement of the lace curtains at each front window. Certain of the houses, it is true, possessed rather ambitious names, which were painted in faded black letters on the ornamental stonework above the door. But the postman knew these houses only by their numbers, the even numbers lying to the left as Linden Terrace was approached from Clapham Common, the odd numbers to the right.

Linden Terrace was a legacy of early Victorianism. Each semi-detached house was of red brick, possessing a bay window on each of its three floors, and a semi-basement below. Wrought-iron fencing of somewhat ornate design, standing on a foundation of cement and brickwork, guarded the houses from the street. An iron gate swung, often noisily, at the entrance to each house, which was approached by a short tiled path. A granite stone church stood at the corner, near to the Common.

On the afternoon of September 29th, 1920, every house in Linden Terrace was in occupation. At Number Five, the third house from the brick wall at the end, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Tibbit and their daughter, new arrivals were due to move into the top floor that afternoon.

It had been a sad day for Millicent Tibbit when her husband, Walter, had returned from the City to report the

failure of his small brokerage business. Before the war, Mrs. Tibbit had kept a maid, who had worn, on her strict instructions, a cap with long streamers; and no other householder in Linden Terrace had ever risen to such grandiose heights. Mrs. Tibbit had, in consequence, felt the indignity of her reduced circumstances most keenly, refusing to take in lodgers until conditions had made it imperative; and to soften the blow it had eventually been advertised that two small "flats" were available, on lease, in this highly desirable neighbourhood.

The first family to answer that advertisement were the James', who had moved in at midsummer and now occupied the first floor. The James' were fortunate in that, on their floor, they had the bathroom originally designed for the house; the Tibbits were therefore forced to make certain alterations to their own accommodation, finally converting into a bathroom their lean-to conservatory at the back. But the Tibbits had the consolation of still possessing, in addition to the ground-floor rooms, the two rooms in the semi-basement.

The letting of the top-floor rooms presented certain difficulties, and the Tibbits were considered fortunate when a Mrs. Bowling, from Muswell Hill, visited the house with her brother, Henry Messenger, and was shown over the top-floor rooms by Walter Tibbit, who hastily made many constructive suggestions as to the possible conversion of these airy rooms into a self-contained flat. It was finally agreed that a small portion of the front living-room should be partitioned off to contain a bath and geyser, with a gas-cooker installed in the other corner of the room, which would be hidden from view by the Bowlings' Japanese screen, when not in use. The small room behind the living-room would be occupied by young Martin Bowling, Mrs. Bowling and her daughter, Joyce, occupying the bedroom at the back. Mr. Messenger agreed to carry out these alterations for his

sister, and an agreement had been drawn up. Subject to the structural part of the work being finished in time, the Bowlings were to move into their new home on Michaelmas Day.

It was the shirt-sleeved figure of Walter Tibbit who opened the door to them, on arrival.

"I'm glad you've arrived safely," he called cheerfully, at the door. "Thought you were never coming. Why, it's past three o'clock! Fine time to start moving in, I must say!" he chuckled. "Still, come along in, Mrs. Bowling. Come along in."

Martin Bowling paid off the taxi and followed his mother into the house, carrying a large brown-paper parcel.

"I'll just tell Mother you've arrived," Mr. Tibbit continued. "We were only saying, not long ago, that it was late to start moving things in."

"We haven't much to move," Martin smiled. "But don't you worry. Once the stuff arrives, it won't take long. I'm sure we shan't put you out at all."

"Oh, not a bit. Not a bit. Sit down, Mrs. Bowling, and make yourself comfortable. Mother will be here in a minute. Put that parcel down in the hall for now. I'll just go and tell her."

"We shouldn't have been so late," Martin explained, "only we found a man with a motor-van, who is picking up another small load. We got a cheaper rate that way."

"Quite so—yes. Now you sit down, Mrs. Bowling, and I'll see if Mother can't make you a nice cup of tea."

"We'd hate to put you to any trouble," Mrs. Bowling replied timidly, as she sat on the edge of the upholstered arm-chair near the fireplace.

"No trouble at all," he smiled over the top of his gold-rimmed spectacles. "Could do with a cup myself, too, now I come to think of it, though it's hardly my proper tea-time yet. I'm just going to start doing a bit of gardening, you see."

*

Always something to do in a garden, Mrs. Bowling," and he stood fingering the old football medal which hung from the centre of his watch-chain. "Never finish, you know. But I'd better tell Mother that you're here, first. She's been wondering what had become of you. We expected you about dinner-time."

With that, his carpet-slipped feet slithered their way down the passage.

"Mother," Martin heard him call through the basement door, "the Bowlings have arrived. I've put them in the front room. They've got a motor-van. It shouldn't be very long now. I think they'd like a cup of tea. I'm just going to put the trellis-work back."

There was a mumbled reply from the depths of the basement, and again Mr. Tibbit's head appeared at the doorway.

"The wind blew my trellis-work down yesterday," he explained. "A good thing the weather's changed for to-day, isn't it? The people over the way, at Number Ten, moved in yesterday. It poured with rain all day. Made it miserable for them, didn't it? Let me see," he added, drawing out his watch and examining it proudly, his head on one side. "It's now ten minutes past three. Well, it won't take me long. But if I shouldn't come in for tea, and the men arrive, I'll be in the garden, if you need a hand."

"Thank you," Martin said. "You are most kind."

"Oh, not at all, Mr. Bowling—not at all. And leave the parcel in the hall for now. Mother won't mind. Then all the stuff can go up together. And now," he smiled, replacing his watch into the pocket of his embroidered waistcoat, "I'll just go out and finish the trellis."

Again he smiled from mother to son, a nod to each, and his feet pattered their way down the passage once more and out into the garden.

Martin walked to the window and stood for a moment surveying their new street.

"You know, Martin, you shouldn't have taken a cab, dear," his mother said, reproachfully.

Martin turned.

"Mother," he laughed, "we don't move every day."

"I know," she replied, twisting her wedding-ring slowly. "I know, dear. But it has been a very expensive time."

Martin left the window and walked over to her, his hand caressing her shoulder.

"Mother," he said, "forget it. I'm in a good job, and so is Joyce. Besides, do you realize that you were up at six this morning, getting things together? Well, you were. And a one-and-a-sixpenny taxi is not going to break the exchequer at this stage, anyway. Forget it, dear," he said, dismissing the subject airily. "Look at Mrs. Tibbit's collection of Goss. Ramsgate!" he exclaimed, picking up one of the pieces hurriedly and examining it. "Dear old Ramsgate! Do you remember the week we had there as kids?"

But Mrs. Bowling was still twisting her wedding-ring.

"Have you got the money for the moving men?" she asked. "I said we'd pay cash."

Martin patted his breast-pocket as a heavy tread was heard in the passage outside. In a moment the massive form of Mrs. Tibbit appeared in the doorway.

"Good afternoon," she said, wiping her hands on her linen apron and looking from mother to son. "Mr. Tibbit said you would care for a cup of tea."

"That would be most kind of you," Mrs. Bowling replied, somewhat apologetically. "I'm sure we hate to trouble you."

"Looking at my collection of Goss, eh?" Mrs. Tibbit asked.

"Yes," Martin replied, a little awkwardly, handing the Ramsgate piece to her. "Just reminded Mother of a holiday we spent in Ramsgate many years ago."

Martin did not know why he had handed the Ramsgate piece to her. She took it, however, and walking over to the mantelpiece replaced it beside the granite clock which held pride of place in the centre of the shelf. She seemed to fuss a little unnecessarily, Martin thought, in rearranging her treasures, breathing with difficulty, as though the effort of walking up the basement stairs had made her out of breath. The whalebones in the collar of her black satin dress, Martin noticed, made her neck bulge a little unhealthily over the top.

"I think we're going to be happy here," he said, for something to say.

"I'm sure I hope so," was her reply.

Satisfied, at last, with the arrangement of her china, she gave a pat to her coiffure, which she regarded critically in the mirror of the overmantel, building her hair even higher above her forehead, and turned, finally, drawing herself up to her full height.

"Then tea shall be served," she said.

Martin watched her large form disappear majestically from the room.

"I don't think she likes us," he said, good-humouredly.

Mrs. Bowling shook her head.

"She's come down in the world, dear. Anyone can see from her bearing that this is a lady who's seen better times."

"Like us?" Martin smiled.

"No," his mother replied. "It isn't the same, dear. She used to drive in a carriage and pair in her young days, she told me, when I was over here last."

"Well, didn't Grandpa Messenger own a Livery Stable?"

"It isn't the same, dear."

"Well, I'm hanged if I see it." And he added, drily: "Perhaps she hired it from Grandpa's stables, anyway," and with a smile he turned back to the window and stood looking up the street once more. Before doing so he had noticed his

mother's eye quietly taking in every piece of furniture in the Tibbits' front room. She seemed to have changed a great deal in the last few months, he thought. Though only fifty-eight, she looked strangely frail to-day, heightened now by the fact that since Mr. Bowling's recent death she had discarded a hat for a bonnet and mantle. The mantle was a Messenger heirloom, having once belonged to her own mother. On it were worked circular patterns in black sequins, and the smell of mothball still clung to its heavy folds, which enveloped her small frame like some huge black eiderdown. Martin also noticed that, sitting in the arm-chair near the mantelshelf, her feet did not touch the ground, so that her tiny black buttoned boots dangled a few inches from the rather worn Axminster carpet. Her fingers, as she clutched the voluminous black bag on her lap, were lean and white; she had removed her cotton gloves in the taxi, driving along. A little grotesque she looked, Martin thought, in that mantle. It was many years since he had seen old ladies wearing such garments, but it was black, and it had belonged to his grandmother, and it had saved buying mourning. Beneath that bonnet, perched on the back of her head like a pill-box, her hair was drawn back, thin and white. It seemed whiter than usual to-day, and her expression more sad, her face more lined.

"Cheer up, Mother," he said encouragingly. "We'll soon be moved in, now."

"Yes, Martin," she said in reply. "I'll be glad when we're properly settled in. It has been a long day." And then, after a pause: "I hope Joyce doesn't forget to bring the provisions, dear. It will be very awkward if she forgets, and the shops are closed."

"Joyce won't forget," Martin reassured her. "It's only something for breakfast, anyway. We'll have our supper round the corner somewhere, when the men have gone."

His brow seemed furrowed, as he returned to the window

and stood again looking out into the street. His mother looked an old lady to-day. Her hair had been growing white for a long time, of course, but it had seemed a gradual process before. Besides, being with her so constantly, he had not noticed the change. But to-day, in that strange bonnet, she seemed suddenly old.

"You'd better take the keys of the trunk, Martin," he heard his mother say. "The van shouldn't be much longer, now."

Martin walked over to take the keys from her as the figure of Mrs. Tibbit reappeared, carrying a large tray. Martin stepped forward to take it from her, but was motioned aside.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind moving that Kashmiri bowl from the centre of the table, young man," she said.

Martin hurriedly moved the bowl aside, and the tray was placed on the green plush-covered table, which stood in the centre of the room. Martin noticed that her silver tea-service had been produced for the occasion. Also that the linen apron had been discarded.

"And now," she said, "I'd better see whether Mr. Tibbit is going to have his tea, too."

Once more she walked from the room, her head erect, supported by her whaleboned neckband.

Mrs. Bowling gave a quick tug to Martin's coat.

"Are you sure, dear, that our things won't look too shabby when they're moved in here," she whispered, anxiously.

"You worry over the strangest things, Mother," he said, leaning down and kissing her lightly on the forehead.

"Walter!" a voice boomed from the back door. "Are you coming in for tea?"

"I think I'll wait till I've finished the trellis."

"Well, don't leave the hammer out all night like you did last time, or you'll have to clean the rust off yourself."

"No, dear, I'll bring the hammer in all right."

Mrs. Tibbit then returned once more.

"I hope," she wheezed, "that your husband was not absent-minded, like mine is." Mrs. Bowling was about to make some suitable reply, when Mrs. Tibbit drew herself up to her full height. "Forgive me," she said. "Your recent bereavement." And sitting down rather heavily into the nearest chair, she drew it closer to the table to make herself comfortable, and lifted the silver tea-pot, saying:

"You take your tea—how?"

"Oh—as it comes, thank you."

"And you, young man?"

"Not too strong—one lump."

"I see you know your own mind," she remarked, as she began pouring the tea into the three cups. "The men came to lay your new lino in the top passage this morning, Mrs. Bowling," she continued. "I gave them a shilling, as I always believe in tipping the lower classes."

Mrs. Bowling began at once to forage into the depths of her voluminous bag.

"Another time," Mrs. Tibbit said, waving the tea-pot in a majestic sweep, before replacing it on the tray. "There will be other little incidentals, I'm sure, before we settle up. Pass this to your mother, young man, and cut that currant cake."

Martin quietly obeyed.

"I see, from the lino people, that you shop at Brown Brothers," Mrs. Tibbit remarked, a few moments later, after each, with forced politeness, had toyed with cup and saucer.

"Yes," Martin replied. "My sister works there."

Mrs. Tibbit was stirring her tea with a small Apostle spoon, which seemed out of place between her flabby and artificially jewelled fingers.

"In what capacity, may I ask?"

"The Piece Goods Department."

"Oh?"

"They've been very good to my daughter," Mrs. Bowling explained. "When she had bronchitis last year, they kept her place open till she was better."

"Really?"

"And my son, you know, works in Camberwell."

"Pass your mother some more cake."

"Oh, no—really no, thank you. It was most delicious," and Mrs. Bowling held her cup, uncertain where to place it, so Martin walked over and took it from her.

"Yes," Martin explained, replacing the cup on the tray. "I work in Camberwell, and Joyce works in Streatham. It's going to be much handier living here than Muswell Hill."

"I'm sure. And what do you do?"

"I'm in Insurance. The Atlantic Company. I was moved down from Head Office three months ago. The Camberwell Green Branch."

"Most interesting," Mrs. Tibbit replied, in the same dull tone. "I, personally, do not believe in Insurance," and she began to tidy the cups on the tray.

"Oh, come now!" Martin said. "The world can't go on without Insurance. Everyone has to insure. . . ."

"I had a small loss last year, young man," she interrupted, "and they paid me a mere pittance! Only a matter of an iron scorching one of my best sheets, but would they pay the full value? Their offer, young man, was an insult!" She added less defiantly: "Of course, it is only since Mr. Tibbit had his financial crash that any washing has been done in this house, you'll understand. Which reminds me, Mrs. Bowling, that if you're doing any washing at home, I'll be glad if you'll make your day coincide with mine. Mrs. James, upstairs, does hers on Monday, the same as I do. Mr. Tibbit and I don't want washing littering up the garden every day of the week."

"I'm sure, Mrs. Tibbit. I quite understand," Mrs. Bowling quietly replied.

"And we'd better get a few other things understood, while we're about it. You can keep your coal in the shed outside—at the far end. Mr. Tibbit has fixed a board to the wall. You'll find it partitioned off. I'll show you your section presently. And will you be having things delivered by the shops, or will you be bringing your own shopping home with you? I ask because I keep no maid now, and I do not want to spend my entire day running to the door."

"I'm sure," Mrs. Bowling replied, "that I have no wish to put you out in any way, Mrs. Tibbit. I will try to cause you as little inconvenience as possible."

"Or, if you have things sent, we must try and use the same Stores. We'll go into all that to-morrow. They're all robbers round here, as you'll quickly find out."

And having piled all the crockery back on to the tray, she turned, and said:

"Have you ordered any milk?"

"I'm afraid I haven't. You see, there were so many things to see to."

"Quite. Well, I expect the James' can lend you some. I see she had a quart delivered this morning, and she's been out all day."

Martin stepped forward quickly.

"Allow me," he said, taking the tray from her.

"Well, I suppose you'd better learn your way about," Mrs. Tibbit grudgingly agreed. "This way," and she led Martin out into the passage, down a flight of four stairs, and then through a door at the left, down some further stairs, into the half-basement. "Put the tray down there, young man," she said, pointing to an American-clothed table in the centre of the room.

"What a fine kitchen!" Martin remarked, noticing that supper was laid for three at one end of the table.

"Yes. But, of course, we don't always dine down here,"

Mrs. Tibbit explained. "Only it's more convenient sometimes. Put the tray here."

"You've got another room down here, too," Martin said, surveying the kitchen.

"Yes. That's where Carol sleeps now."

"Carol?"

"My daughter."

"Oh—I see."

"It used to be the maid's room, before Mr. Tibbit's failure," Mrs. Tibbit further explained, moving over to the window, heavily barred with an iron grille, and opening it a few inches more. "Though some of the hussies I've had here said there wasn't enough air. Air! Why, there's all the air anyone needs, unless you want to go to the North Pole!" And she tossed her head so viciously that a hairpin at the back slipped unsteadily.

"Quite," Martin replied, watching her manœuvre the pin. "I'm sure."

"And I wouldn't have no daughter of mine sleeping down here, either, if it wasn't healthy."

"Of course you wouldn't."

A voice at that moment called down the stairs from above.

"Have you cleared the tea away, Mother?"

Mrs. Tibbit, the hairpin now between her teeth, removed it and stuck it fiercely into the massive curls at the back.

"Never in time for anything!" she muttered, moving towards the kitchen door.

Martin saw, as she passed, that her hair possessed a noticeable tinge of red. Momentarily, as it caught the rays of the dying sun through the barred window, its artificiality had been exposed.

"It's cold now, I expect," she shouted wearily up the stairs, "but you'd better come down and have it."

Walter Tibbit's feet began to patter their way down the stairs.

“I had to put a screw in to hold it,” Martin heard him say on the way down. “But I think it will be all right now. Ah, Mr. Bowling! Just having a look round?” he asked, brightly.

“Don’t put the tools on the table, Walter!”

“No, dear, I won’t,” Mr. Tibbit replied, opening the right-hand drawer of the dresser and placing the screwdriver, the hammer, and a small tin box, tidily inside. “Yes,” he said, rubbing the dirt off his hands, “I think I’ve made a good job of that, Mother. Any sign of the van yet?” he asked.

"No. But it shouldn't be much longer now, Mr. Tibbit."

“Good. Now I’ll just have a cup of tea. Haven’t we got any rock-cakes to-day?” he asked, looking at the remains of the small currant cake on its soiled paper doily.

"You get along with that, Walter," she said, pointing to the remains of the cake, "and stop for ever asking for what's not on the table. I never saw a man go on the way you do. Must have your mustard pickles for your dinner, just because I served up some nice beetroot!"

“But I’m very fond of mustard pickles, Mother,” he replied, pouring out some stewed black tea from the silver tea-pot. “Very appetizing. Still, Mother’s very good to me,” he explained to Martin, regarding him over the top of his gold-rimmed spectacles with a benign smile. “You wait till you taste her pastry. It’s better than I used to get at Simpson’s in the old days, and that’s saying something. Ever tried their steak and kidney, Mr. Bowling, at their Cornhill place?”

"No," Martin replied.

"Well, you've missed something. All right, Mother, I'll put it on," he said, noticing his wife pointing to his jacket, which was hanging over the back of a chair.

"A nice way to be dressed with the Bowlings moving in, I must say!" she said, "showing your braces, and all. Are you coming up to your Mother, young man?"

Walter Tibbit, having slipped into his Norfolk jacket, gave Martin a nudge with his elbow.

"Why not stay down here and talk till the van arrives?" he suggested, timidly.

"Right-oh! I'll stay down here, Mrs. Tibbit. We'll be up presently."

Without further word, Mrs. Tibbit walked asthmatically up the stairs; Walter Tibbit walked over at once to the kitchen door and closed it quietly.

"I'm very glad you've come to live here," he confided as he walked back to his tea. "You know, I like the company of men. Women are all right in their way. Too fussy, though," he explained. "Always seem to be finding fault, you know. Now Mr. James, upstairs, he's a nice sort of fellow in his way, but he's not the sporty sort. Doesn't take a drop to drink. Not that I take a lot myself, but I like to sit with a man now and again and have a talk, you know. By the way, I've got a quart bottle in the cupboard there, if you'd like a drop?"

"No, thank you. Not just yet. Your tea's getting cold," Martin reminded him, smilingly.

"Oh, yes. Care for another cup?"

"No, thank you."

"You're very welcome," and Walter Tibbit pulled up the chair that had supported his frayed Norfolk jacket and drew it to the other end of the table, facing the already laid places for supper. "Yes," he said, "I like the companionship of men. There's a Club near here. You'll have to join. Not much of a Club, I suppose. But it makes a change to drop in now and again. And the Reindeer round the corner isn't a bad place. Some prefer the Star and Garter, but Mother likes the Reindeer best. But do you know," he added, helping himself to a large piece of cake, "I've got out of the way of being really sociable since I left the City. Find it dull, you know, sitting around here most of the day. Could find

a job, I expect, even at my age, but after having been in business for myself, it makes it hard for a man to start over again. So when Mother decided to let rooms, I thought I'd stay at home and help her. Lot to do here," he added, looking up.

"I'm sure," Martin agreed.

"Don't keep a maid now, you know."

"No?"

"Not since I had to give up. Used to be in the Almond business."

"Really?"

"What's *your* trade?"

"Insurance."

"Well, a nice business I should say. Used to know a few in it in the old days. Never see them now, though. Don't see much of anybody these days," and he sat munching his cake reflectively, his eyes looking towards the kitchen range. A grey wisp of hair was brushed across the top of his head; otherwise it was hairless, save for the back, where it grew thickly and drooped over his winged collar. His neck was lean and sagged at both sides, so that his frayed collar seemed many sizes too large. "Yes," he continued, "used to have some good times when I was in the City. Caught the same train every morning, and the same one back. Never late once. And do you know," he said, his eyes lighting up as the memory came to him, "I used the same front collar-stud for over twenty years! It broke," he added, "just before my crash."

"Really?" Martin replied.

"All my friends used to pull my leg, you know. Always asked how the stud was wearing. A bone one, it was. But one morning, as I was dressing to go to the City, it snapped in two. I've got the pieces still," he said, helping himself to some more lukewarm tea. "Oh, yes, I've had some good times," he continued. "But Mother always said that that stud

breaking was our bad omen. Had to close up the business shortly after," and he took his cup in both hands and drank rather noisily.

"That was bad luck," Martin said. "How did that come about?"

"Competition. Only a small business, you know. Bad debts. Then my partner died. Well," he added, "when I say partner, that's hardly right. He was and he wasn't, as you might say. He used to help finance me, and I ran the business."

"Too bad!" Martin said. "And so now you help your wife at home instead?"

"Yes. Try to make myself useful, you know. But it's not the same, Mr. Bowling. I miss having all the fellows about. Used to go into the Bodega after lunch and play a game of dominoes, most days. Well, I'm not saying that dominoes would set the Thames afire, but it made a change, you know. Often had a drink at Cannon Street Station with some of the fellows before coming home, and we'd often run a sweepstake or two on some of the big races, too. Variety, you know. That's what I miss. Now every day seems the same. Nothing ever happens. I've lived in this house for twenty-seven years, you know. Bought it freehold when I got married. It's just the same outside as when I bought it, except that the paint on the windows is green now. Used to be white. Mother found it difficult to keep clean after the servant had to go, so I painted them green. Otherwise, it's just the same as when I first bought it. So are the other houses in the street. Nothing seems to happen round this way. They had a nasty fire in Laburnum Terrace last winter, and we changed the Vicar last spring. Quite a nice sort of chap, the new one. He called here not so long ago, and had a cup of tea with Mother and me. But things just go on the same old way, year in and year out. You wake up and you go to bed. That's about all there is to it now. Of course, Mr.

James, upstairs, he's all right in his way. Nicely spoken, you know. Very quiet about the place. Now, when the James' first moved in I thought I'd find him companionable, too, 'cause I'm a very easy-going sort of a fellow myself, and I looked forward to spending some time with him, see? But he don't seem inclined to be sociable. Mind you, not that he's above himself in any way. He's a well-set-up young fellow, and doing nicely from all appearances. When I hear his key in the front door, round about half-past six, I'll often pop my head out, hoping he'll stop and have a chat, but he'll pass up the stairs with a 'Good evening, Mr. Tibbit. A nice day,' or something like that. And it's not that I haven't tried. Why, on Mother's birthday last June, I up and asked them if they'd care for a game of whist after supper. But they excused themselves. No," he added, removing a stray tea-leaf from his mouth, "I'm afraid the James' aren't very sociable folk."

"What does he do?" Martin asked.

"Blessed if I know. That's the sort of chap he is. Never tells you anything. No, you couldn't call the James' sociable," he repeated, placing his cup finally on the tray and wiping his grey moustache with the back of his hand. "Not to my interpretation, anyway," and he rose from the table and began rolling a cigarette, whistling quietly to himself.

Martin watched him. He was obviously a heavy smoker; the lower portion of his shaggy grey moustache was stained a dark brown.

"You make your own, I see," he said.

"Yes," Walter Tibbit replied. "I've rolled my own cigarettes for over twenty years. Always smoked the same tobacco, too. Care for some?" and he proffered a large skin pouch.

"No, thanks. I smoke 'Player's.' "

They both lighted up.

"The van's late," Mr. Tibbit said presently, looking up through the iron-barred window. "Got much stuff?"

"No. Not a lot."

"Fond of furniture?"

"Oh—yes. I don't know a great deal about it, though."

"Ever attended a sale?"

"Yes. I did once. I bought a desk. Cost me quite a bit of my gratuity, too," Martin added smilingly. "At least, I spent more than I should."

"Well, if we never did that," Walter Tibbit replied, "a fine thing it would be for trade, I must say. Often in the old days I'd go to sales, you know. Take one of my chums with me. Sometimes we'd buy; sometimes we wouldn't. Nothing very expensive, mind you, but it made a nice change. Once I bought a wrought-iron fender, but it didn't blend with the room, Mother said, so I sold it to Bert Freeman, opposite. Quite a nice fellow. Sold it him for what I paid for it. Could have asked more, I suppose, but didn't like to, him being a neighbour. Yes," he added, "I used to like attending sales in the lunch-hour. Made quite a nice change."

Martin watched him drawing at his hand-made cigarette.

"Hadn't we better go up and see what's happening?" he asked.

"Yes, suppose we had. Don't want to miss the van. Then, perhaps, after the move, we can slip round to the Reindeer. I think we ought to have one to-night, don't you, Mr. Bowling? Drink to the house, you know. Drink to your health and prosperity under your new roof. What?" And Walter Tibbit looked supremely happy at that moment.

"Certainly," Martin replied. "And I think we are going to be very happy here, too."

"That's the spirit!" and Walter Tibbit smacked Martin heartily on the back. "Now *you're* a nice companionable fellow, Mr. Bowling. I think we're going to get on very nicely together. And any little thing I can do for you, you've

only to say the word. Nothing's too much trouble," he added, opening the kitchen door and leading Martin cheerfully up the stairs.

As they turned into the passage at the top of the staircase, a key was heard in the front door. It was opened by a neat figure in blue serge, who closed the door carefully, replacing the key in her bag.

"Ah! That's Mrs. James!" Walter Tibbit explained, walking effusively towards her. "What a nice day it's been, to be sure, hasn't it? Come and meet Mr. Bowling, Mrs. James. He and his mother are moving in upstairs. We're expecting the van any moment now."

The blue-serged figure bowed politely.

"Pleased to meet you," she murmured.

"How-do-you-do?" Martin said, extending his hand.

Mrs. James transferred her bag under her left arm, and they solemnly shook hands. She had a sallow skin, Martin noticed, and her eyes were a deep brown. Her hair was dark and she wore a small blue straw hat, which was perched at an angle over her left ear.

"Pleased to meet you," she said again, and Martin released a cotton-gloved hand.

"I hear that we shall be living above you. I hope we shan't make too much noise," Martin said. "Especially to-night, getting our furniture arranged."

Mrs. James smiled coyly.

"Oh, I'm sure you won't," she said. "In any case, my husband and I are wonderful sleepers." And, after an awkward pause, she said: "If you will excuse me, I think I'd better get along upstairs. Did a parcel come from the cleaners, do you know?"

Walter Tibbit's hand reached for the handle of the front-room door, and he opened it slightly.

"Mother, did a parcel come from the cleaners for Mrs. James?" he shouted.

"No."

"No," he repeated, closing the door again. "Nothing's come."

"Oh——" and Mrs. James stood for a moment. Then, with a curt smile to each, she tripped lightly up the stairs, and a door was heard to close on the floor above.

Walter Tibbit drew Martin aside.

"That's what I say," he whispered into Martin's ear. "The James' aren't sociable, you see. Never time to stop and have a gossip. Nice people, mind you, but they keep themselves too much to themselves. But they won't give you any trouble." With that, he opened the door of the front room once more.

"Yes," Martin heard Mrs. Tibbit saying. "I used to have your front room, Mrs. Bowling, as my boudoir. A little high up, of course, but I didn't have the asthma then."

"Just getting acquainted with your son," Walter Tibbit explained perkily, as they entered the room.

Mrs. Bowling nodded smilingly.

"And your wife," she said, "has been most kind."

Mrs. Tibbit surveyed her husband for a moment.

"Did Mrs. James have anything to say?" she asked.

"No, dear. Just went upstairs, like she usually does. It's about time that van arrived, though, isn't it?" And he, too, looked up and down the street, standing beside Martin, who stood with his hands in the pockets of his sports coat. "Been held up in traffic, I expect," Tibbit volunteered. "The traffic's getting very bad. Especially coming all the way from North London. In my young days, with the horse buses, it took no time at all. See that man coming along? That's Bert Freeman, the man who bought my fender. He lives at Number Fourteen. He always comes home about this time. Nice fellow. Was widowed last year. Two kids. His sister lives with him now. Quite a nice woman," he added, as he started rolling another cigarette. "Oh, there's some nice

people living this way, still. Of course, the locality has come down a bit, you understand. But then, where hasn't it? Look! There's Bert opening the gate. I bet his sister is there waiting for him, with the kids. Look! There she is, and the kids too! Nice sociable people," he repeated, lighting the scraggy cigarette and throwing the match into the green china bowl which housed the aspidistra in the bay window.

"Is that Bert Freeman?" Mrs. Tibbit asked, in the middle of a conversation with Martin's mother.

"Yes, he's just kissing the kids."

"He's home earlier to-night."

"Oh, I don't know, Mother," he said, looking over at the granite clock on the mantelpiece. "It's past four," and he checked the time with his own watch. "Usually home about this time, Mr. Bowling. Bert works in a brewery. Has an early start of a morning, you know. Usually home about four. Nice chap. Very companionable, when you get to know him. Ah, what's this? There's something coming down the road now, isn't there?"

Martin peered out also.

"Yes," he agreed. "I think that's the van all right."

Mrs. Bowling began to gather her pieces together.

"Then we'd better get started," she said. "It's been most kind of you, Mrs. Tibbit."

"Now, don't you get flustered, dear," Mrs. Tibbit replied. "You sit here for a while. The men can easily get things started."

"Yes, the van's drawing up at the door!" Walter Tibbit cried, excitedly. "It makes quite a change, you know, having someone move in. We'd better go out, hadn't we?" and he took Martin by the arm. "You stay there, Mother," he said, "there's no need for you to move. I suppose you know where everything is to go?"

"Yes," Martin replied, "more or less."

The two ladies had already moved to the window by the

time that the men had left the room. Even Mrs. Tibbit, who seemed to Martin to have relaxed a little since their arrival, was peering out, also.

"A fine van!" Walter Tibbit said admiringly, in the doorway.

The driver had left his seat, and two other men had appeared from the rear by the time that Martin and Walter Tibbit were in the street.

"Been held up?" Walter Tibbit asked. "Traffic bad?"

The driver touched his cap.

"Got in two nasty blocks, sir," he answered. "But the boys know their job. They won't take long moving in this little lot."

The large form of Mrs. Tibbit appeared at the doorway.

"Hadn't we better have the stair carpets up, Walter?" she shouted. "We don't want the men making a mess all up my stairs."

"Oh, that'll be all right, Mother. It's quite dry. Not like it was for the people opposite at Number Ten. No, they won't make any mess to speak of. Anyhow, if they do, I'll see to it. That'll be all right, Mother. You go and sit down."

Martin was already at the rear of the van, talking to the men, as faces appeared discreetly behind the lace curtains of the near-by houses. Mrs. Tibbit stood for a moment, and then, with a shrug of her heavy shoulders, she disappeared from view. Mrs. James, from upstairs, came hurriedly down the stairs and passed quickly up the street. Aprons were donned by the men, and the first piece of furniture was carefully removed from the van and placed on the pavement.

And so began the removal of the Bowling family into Linden Terrace on the afternoon of September 29th, 1920.

II

THE FIRST PERSON TO leave Number Five Linden Terrace, next morning in the rain, was Carol Tibbit, who had eaten a frugal breakfast, listening to her mother as she wheezed her way about the kitchen in her quilted dressing-gown, commenting upon the events of the neighbourhood, and grumbling expressively that her husband should choose to mend the blind in the lean-to bathroom just as his kipper was cooked.

Carol Tibbit combined breakfast with glancing at the picture paper, which was leaning against the tea-pot in front of her, and which had to be left behind each morning, as her mother enjoyed reading the serial story during her leisure hours. To Carol's left, a fire burned in the kitchener, on top of which Mr. Tibbit's kipper was deposited to keep warm, and above, on a cord stretched from side to side, various under-garments of his were hung to dry. After turning to see the time from the alarm clock on the dresser behind her, Carol closed the paper hurriedly, rose from the table and went into her room, where she selected a white mackintosh from her wardrobe and took out her grey felt hat from a cardboard box at the end of her bed.

"I'm off, Mums," she said, returning to the kitchen some moments later.

Mrs. Tibbit turned.

"I'm glad to see," she remarked, "that you're wearing your mac a wet morning like this. The way you girls wear nothing to-day, on top—*or* underneath—and then sit all day in your wet clothes, beats me. No wonder you catch colds."

"But I'm wearing my mac."

"I said I was glad to see that you were," her mother wheezed.

Carol slowly buttoned up her mackintosh.

"I'll be home early," she said.

"Yes, don't be late, there's a good girl. Your father got quite anxious last night. You know the way he gets."

"I wasn't so late."

"Well, you didn't come straight home. Now did you?"

"No, but I was home by half-past nine."

"And then you never had your supper."

"Well, I'd had something to eat—out."

"I'm cooking one of your father's favourite suppers to-night. Try and be home in time."

"I will," Carol replied. "By the way, Mums, I met the young man from upstairs this morning."

"You mean young Mr. Bowling?"

"Yes. What sort of people are they?"

Mrs. Tibbit, standing by the kitchen table, poured herself out another strong cup of tea.

"Well," she sniffed, "they're quite respectable, I suppose."

"The boy seemed shy."

"All the better for that, I've no doubt."

"What's he do?"

"Insurance, I think he said. Why?"

"I couldn't place him. That's all," Carol answered, fixing the belt of her mackintosh.

"He got a commission in the war, his mother told me. He's gone back to his old job, now. Tell that father of yours his kipper's spoiling, will you, as you go up?"

"All right. Good-bye, Mums."

Carol walked up the stairs and opened the bathroom door, to find her father, in his shirt-sleeves, sitting on the edge of the bath, the linen blind in his hand.

"Mums says you must go down and have your breakfast at once, Daddy."

"Just coming, dear. Only got to hang it up, now. Going to kiss your old father before you go?"

"Now, don't you keep her waiting," Carol laughed, pulling his ear playfully, "or you'll get into hot water!"

Walter Tibbit looked up.

"All right. Just coming. You know," he smiled, "you're looking prettier than ever to-day, dear," and he wagged his head happily from side to side.

In a moment a slender white-mackintoshed figure was in the rainswept street, walking up Linden Terrace, an umbrella held in front of her, the wind making progress even more difficult by continually wrapping the mackintosh around her legs.

At the top of the street, she turned and crossed the Common to the Underground station, where she showed her season ticket to the Inspector at the gate and passed down to the platform to enter the first train that came in. Two men arose simultaneously to offer her a seat; she smilingly accepted, and a man stood in consequence, clutching a strap until Waterloo, when he left the carriage, once more raising his bowler hat graciously to Carol.

Having digested the world's news at breakfast, Carol Tibbit always spent the journey to Cannon Street thinking of her own work for the day. But yesterday had been a very unusual day, and she was still a little bewildered by its events. She had, as her mother had pointed out, arrived home later than usual; in fact, she had been exactly three hours late. But during those three hours so much had seemed to happen. Sitting in that Underground railway carriage, as she had done for nearly two years at the same time each morning with, as she noticed, some of the same familiar faces in the carriage, it seemed impossible to believe that the whole thing was not a dream after all. Three hours! They passed so

quickly in the course of a normal day. They represented the time from which she usually returned from her lunch each day, until the time that young Jack, the office-boy, brought in her cup of tea at five o'clock. How often she had remarked how quickly those few hours had passed. Three hours! Yet from 6 p.m. until 9 p.m. were exactly three hours, too.

Carol sat, her eyes looking towards the advertisements at the top of the windows, not reading them. They danced before her eyes, as the train rattled its way through the dark bricked tunnel. Three hours! To be exact, once more, it was precisely twelve hours since she had been dropped, in a taxi, at Victoria station, by Mr. Severn. Just a few minutes over twelve hours, perhaps, for she remembered seeing the clock as she passed through to her platform to catch her train home. She remembered little else on that journey last night, until she found herself at Clapham Common station. Then she had walked thoughtfully home across the Common.

And now she was going to Connaught House, Gracechurch Street, just as she had been doing for nearly two years. On the second floor she would spend the next eight hours in the small office outside Mr. Robin Severn's. Yesterday, she had gone there as his secretary. To-day would be different. She wondered so much how different it would be. Mr. Severn had said last night that in business they must still be Director and Secretary, and that there must be no talking amongst the staff. That was absolutely out of the question. But how like a man! How could it be the same after last night? How could it ever be the same?

She remembered every detail of yesterday so vividly. The bell had rung just after her tea, the buzzer which told her that Mr. Severn required her services. She had picked up her note-book and pencil and had walked through the communicating door into his office. Mr. Severn was sitting in

his swivel chair, turned now so that he faced down Grace-church Street. He turned suddenly and said:

"Miss Tibbit—I would like you to dine with me to-night."

Carol blushed, she knew, and something inside her seemed to sink, just as it always did when she had to go on a long journey; the same sensation that she had felt before starting for her holiday to Scotland that summer.

"I want to talk to you," she heard Mr. Severn say, his neat square hands clasped on the desk before him, and Carol glanced up from her note-book, to find him looking at her earnestly.

"Carol," he said, "I'm afraid that things can't go on like this."

It was the first time that he had ever called her by the pet name that her father had given to her and she wondered how he knew it, for she had applied for this situation, two years previously, under her real name—Mary Ellen Tibbit. But she had not realized, until that moment, how strangely sweet that name could sound.

"How, Mr. Severn?" she asked, her eyes returning to the opened note-book, pages of which, in the ordinary working day, would now have been filled with shorthand notes. "I don't understand."

"Carol," he said again, leaning forward now, "what I have to say to you may alter our relationship entirely. You may wish to leave here and I would be the last to blame you if you did. But this thing has got to be faced."

Carol glanced up timidly.

"What thing, Mr. Severn?" she asked.

"I'm afraid," he answered, "that you have become more to me than a secretary, Carol. It is a most unfortunate thing and I am the first to admit it. Nevertheless, it exists and we must face the situation as it is. And it is only fair that I should tell you."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. . . ."

"I love you, Carol," he said, leaning nearer across the desk. "That is what has got to be faced."

The oak-panelled office seemed suddenly to revolve. Carol saw the curtains of the opened window sway in the breeze and return to their normal position, only to be blown vigorously across the pane once more. She saw Mr. Severn raise his right hand and close the window, shutting out all sound of the traffic in Gracechurch Street below. In the sudden stillness, she could hear him breathe, as he sat opposite to her, the sound-proof window accentuating every breath, which seemed to quicken as he looked at her.

"Besides," she heard him say, "it isn't fair to you to have you so close to me for all these hours each day, without telling you."

Carol looked again at her note-book, the ruled lines of which seemed to converge and then to grow wide apart. The pencil in her hand became distorted in shape, looking now like some huge ship's funnel, only to change shape quickly again. She glanced up timidly and noticed that the flowers in their blue vase on his desk were drooping wearily over the sides.

"I expect this will be a shock to you," she heard him say, "and I had thought of asking you to find work elsewhere. That, I suppose, is what I should have done—to have dismissed you without explaining the circumstances. But I couldn't, Carol. Yes, I know it's selfish, and I suppose it is very weak, too. But you and I have worked together closely now for nearly two years. During all this time you have spent half your waking hours with me. You know my reactions to most problems. Some say that I'm ruthless. I suppose I am. Seldom, I'm afraid, am I ruthless where I, myself, am concerned. You may perhaps have noticed that," he added.

"No," she replied very quietly.

"Carol," he said, "I am again reverting to type, I'm

afraid. I am leaving the decision to you. But before you make it, I wish to be even more frank with you. I am married, as, of course, you know."

"Yes," Carol answered, her eyes downcast.

"I have two children. My boys mean everything to me."

"Yes."

"I could do nothing that might lead to my losing those boys."

"Yes, Mr. Severn."

"My wife—well, I prefer not to bring her name into this discussion. We live under the same roof. That is all."

"Yes, Mr. Severn."

Again those lines began to converge on her note-book. Her head, too, became dizzy, as she passed her hand wonderingly across her forehead.

"But I need you. I want more of you than I have now. I find my thoughts returning to you all the time that I'm away from you. You have so got into my mind that I can't sleep. During the day, as I sit at my desk here, I am again only too aware of your presence next door. I have only to push this bell on my desk and I have you with me. Don't you see that it can't go on like this?"

"Yes, Mr. Severn—I do—now."

"I think I have explained my own position quite frankly," he continued, speaking slowly and with obvious difficulty. "I will not mention the matter again. I shall be leaving the office in a few moments. You can therefore take your time deciding what you wish to do, but I shall be at Mordoni's in Soho at seven o'clock. From now onwards it is in your hands to decide. If you do not come to-night I can simplify matters by having you transferred to another department, as you will understand that it will be impossible for us to continue to work so closely together, in that case—after what I have told you."

"I understand, Mr. Severn."

Carol rose, a little unsteadily, from her chair. Her heart was pounding excitedly beneath her grey striped costume, as she glanced up to see Robin Severn's anxious face, through a haze, across his desk. She longed to go to him, to hold him closely, and to comfort him. But she stood transfixed. Everything had now become estranged. She had entered his room, ten minutes earlier, with composure. She could have laughed, then; she could have spoken and answered his questions with clear eyes and mind. Now everything was confused. Their old relationship, too. They were together in the same office that had held them, alone, for so long, but everything had changed—inexplicitly. Who would make the first move, she wondered? Why should they both become like statues in a cathedral? Why couldn't she speak? Why couldn't she walk out of his room and close the communicating door between them, and be left alone with her thoughts—thoughts that were now running in riotous confusion through her brain?

She saw Robin rise from his desk and she felt his nearness for the second time in her life, as his hands rested for a moment on her shoulders.

"Dear Carol," he said, "I shall understand if you don't wish to come. But it must be the end of our association—otherwise. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes," she whispered.

In a moment, she was sitting again before her typewriter. She heard Mr. Severn's door close and was listening to his footsteps as he walked hurriedly down the passage. Minutes passed before she completely regained her composure. She then put on her grey felt hat and walked out of the office, for there was no more work to do, as Mr. Severn had written no letters since his return from lunch. She walked thoughtfully up Gracechurch Street and into Cornhill, turning left and entering the Underground station at the Bank, for her mind was made up, then; she would dine

with Mr. Severn. That, anyhow, could do no harm. Her feet seemed to be walking on air and her head seemed to tower above the heads of all the other pedestrians, for she was elated as she had never been before. Robin Severn! Until a few moments ago they had been working together in complete harmony, he controlling his section of the business with a strength and fairness which his staff respected, and Carol contributing a quick efficiency, answering to and anticipating his every need. They had been a fine team and they understood each other's ways. Work proceeded smoothly on the second floor of Connaught House, which contained the apartments under Mr. Severn's control. It had been his idea to run the business on different floors, and Carol had helped him in the reorganization. Men feared, yet respected, Mr. Robin Severn. The girls in the office thought him aloof, but thought that, to some women, he might have charm; to which Carol had always agreed. She realized, at the same time, that it seemed impossible ever to break through his impenetrable reserve. But he was fine to work for; inspiring at times, too. Robin Severn! She remembered how she used to watch him signing his letters in the office, thinking how beautiful his name looked as he wrote it. She had often repeated it to herself. Robin Severn! Such a beautiful name. And Robin Severn loved her!

She arrived, in due course, at Oxford Circus. She would walk up Portland Place, she decided, and presently round Regent's Park, wasting the necessary moments until seven o'clock. She found it pleasant walking in the cool of that autumn evening, and she laughed aloud, at one moment, from sheer happiness. What did anything matter, really? Life had been a drab affair ever since she could remember. Now her parents were reduced to taking in lodgers on the two upstairs floors. Another family were moving in that very day. Robin Severn loved her! What did anything matter in the world, beside that? She could not leave that office—

and him—and find work elsewhere, just as he was held to her by the same invisible tie. She knew that, now. And it would not be long before she saw him again. Perhaps, outside the office, that overpowering feeling of shyness would disappear. How gauche she must have looked, she thought, standing in front of his desk, not knowing where to look, or what to say. Why hadn't she told him, then and there, that, almost since the beginning of their association, she had loved him, too? Robin Severn! What a lovely name! By the time that she had walked right round Regent's Park, she would have wasted sufficient time. She had only to turn south to Soho, then—and to Robin!

"Carol," he said, excitedly, after they had been escorted by a gesticulating Italian to a reserved table in the corner. "I was so afraid you wouldn't come."

"Why?" she asked, simply.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," he said. "Perhaps, because I wanted you to come more than I've wanted anything in my life. But as I sat so long, watching the swing-door . . ."

"Was I late?" she asked, quickly.

He smiled then, and his hand touched hers across the table.

"No," he said. "You weren't late, Carol, but as the minutes passed, I began to regret my outburst this afternoon. If you shouldn't come! Why should you come, after all? But it would have meant the end—otherwise. You see," he continued, leaning nearer across the table, "I've loved you, I think, since the first day you came into my office to take down my letters. Do you remember that day? You wore a green frock."

Carol placed her gloves tidily by her side.

"Green's unlucky," she said, glancing up into Robin's bronzed face and noticing his troubled eyes and his hair greying at the temples. She had never seen or properly inter-

preted such a look in a man's eyes before. And his fingers were strong as they now clasped hers.

"Yes," she added, slowly, "I remember that day very well, Mr. Severn."

For a moment his eyes seemed to lose their seriousness.

"My name's Robin," he said.

"I don't think I could ever call you that."

"Why?"

"Well—it's difficult, isn't it?"

"Not now," he said. "Not since you've come," and he held more tightly to her hand.

"Why do you love me?" she asked after a long silence.

"Why? How can one tell why? I think," he said, "that it really happened that day when you were in my office, Carol, and you came to my side of the desk. It was the first time you had been there."

"I remember perfectly," Carol answered, happy that he, too, should remember. "You had cut your finger, trying to sharpen a pencil, and I bound it up for you."

"With lovely cool fingers," he said, taking her hand again.

How wonderful he looked, in his beautifully tailored clothes! How different from everyone she had ever known! How beautifully he ordered their dinner and how the waiters seemed to respect him, too, for even they could see that he was different, as she could.

"I became aware of your nearness, then," she heard him saying. "I hadn't before. Then I began to watch you. I couldn't help myself. The way you moved, the way you wore your clothes, even the way you took down my letters, with your long fingers twining round your pencil. You fascinated me, Carol. Then I began to love your hair, too—the way it grew back from your forehead in long, lazy waves—like ripples on the water of some calm sea. Sea," he added, "when the golden sun is setting behind it. Tell me,"

he asked, suddenly, "when you wake in the morning, is your hair all tousled?"

"Yes," she answered, laughingly. "Of course."

"What do you do with it?"

"Oh—I just run a comb through it."

"Yes," he answered, gripping her hand more tightly, "it looks like that, Carol. Just as if you had run a comb through it," and his blue eyes moved quickly towards her hair. "I've often imagined you asleep. Then waking. I've imagined you getting up and walking to your mirror, your long, slender limbs in some clinging silk. Then picking up your comb and running it carelessly through your hair. Do you do that?" he asked, eagerly.

"Of course. Every girl does," she smiled.

"But not like you do, Carol. *They couldn't.*"

There had been silence for a moment, while each studied the other, their hands still intertwined across the restaurant table. Carol remembered thinking how his eyes seemed to close as he looked at her and then to open slowly, as if to smile back into hers. She wondered whether it was the champagne that made her feel that way. Then she remembered thinking how silly it was to worry whether they closed or not; to worry about anything. It was the first time that any man had spoken to her so beautifully. Men had, of course, said similar things to her before, but how differently they had said them! But Mr. Severn *was* different. The touch of his strong, well-shaped hand on hers made her feel different, too, and she was exhilarated, yet a little bewildered. She had never dined at such a restaurant before and champagne was comparatively new to her. And Mr. Robin Severn, a director of Severn & Browning, for whom she had worked for nearly two years, was sitting alone with her in Mordoni's, in Soho, grasping her outstretched hand as if nothing else mattered in his life!

How happy they had been at dinner! And then he had

driven her, in a taxi, to Victoria Station, and she had felt his lips close to hers, and his strong arms encircling her, as they had driven along. It had been an evening of madness. An unforgettable evening. Nothing mattered, now. Their relationship was on a firm basis. She realized that Robin Severn was now as vital to her own life as she was to his. They were going to meet regularly, in future, outside the office, and Robin was going to take her to places where neither of them would be recognized. Already they had planned their next outing.

What did it matter, she had thought, as she walked home across the Common, if their house was now filled with strange people? What did anything matter? At a quarter to ten to-morrow she would be hearing Robin's footsteps pass the door of her room. His door would open. Would her nervousness return when she was in the office again? In Mordoni's she had finally cast her shyness aside. In her small office to-morrow, through the communicating door, would be Robin's oak-panelled room, with his desk near the window. How would they meet, she wondered? How, too, could she look at him and watch him dictating his correspondence, without remembering to-night? His mouth had clung so desperately to hers. How silly of Robin! As if it could make no difference!

Carol found herself at the door of Connaught House. She shook her umbrella in the entrance hall and went up in the lift to the second floor, passing through a double swing-door into the large main office. There she turned to the right, giving a smile to those who saw her and noticing that the rest of the staff had arrived and were already preparing for the day's work. Entering the door at the end of the passage, she removed her mackintosh and hung it on the hat-stand in the corner, shaking her felt hat before hanging it above and placing her umbrella beneath. Her typewriter stood on

its table in the centre of the room and she walked over and removed its oilcloth hood and put it away in the large drawer on the left-hand side, before sitting down and placing the small mirror from her bag on the typewriter in front of her, whilst she attended to her appearance. She then opened another drawer and drew out her shorthand note-book, noticing with a smile that for the first time since she had joined Severn & Browning there were no notes to type this morning. Robin had left the office yesterday early—and suddenly! Oh, how completely upside down her world had now become! “It must make no difference,” Robin had said last night. As if it could make no difference!

The minutes seemed to drag by interminably as Carol sat at her desk. For distraction, she turned and looked out of her window, watching the sea of shining umbrellas moving slowly along the pavements of Gracechurch Street below, and the hanging sign over the shop opposite swaying noisily to and fro in the wind. Would he never come? There was so much that she wanted to say to him. Her heart seemed to be pounding even more excitedly than it had done last night. It could not be long now, though; he was always in by nine forty-five. She remembered that she had forgotten to change the date on the calendar on his desk, so she rose a little guiltily and hurried into the oak-panelled room next door, finding herself standing in front of Robin’s desk, just as she had done yesterday. There was a strange silence in the room this morning; the sound-proof windows had not been opened since Robin had closed them during their conversation yesterday. She glanced round the familiar objects, to find that everything was as yesterday, except that the padded swivel chair was empty and that the blooms in the blue vase on his desk had wilted in the night. She wished, then, that she had asked her father for some flowers from the garden. She would like to have brought roses, red roses in profusion, and to have scattered them lovingly on his desk. Dear

Robin! She lifted the calendar and changed the date from September 29th to September 30th, realizing that until yesterday September 29th had meant a Quarter Day, with its consequent duties and responsibilities. Now it represented the beginning of a new era. . . . She tidied the post on Robin's blotter, sighed happily, and returned to her own room.

At nine forty-six she heard the familiar tread on the parquet flooring of the passage and Robin's footsteps halting outside, with the usual rattle of the handle as he opened his door. She heard him move to his desk and the noise of the castors as he drew his chair nearer to his work. Would he never call? She stood by the window, waiting, her heart beating even more furiously, the blood rushing even more riotously to her cheeks.

"Oh—Miss Tibbit. My buzzer doesn't seem to be working. Have it seen to, please!"

Carol turned quickly, to find that the communicating door had already closed.

"Send up Mr. Burn," she was saying, a few moments later. "Yes, Mr. Burn, the electrician. Mr. Severn's buzzer isn't working. Yes, the one that rings into my office."

And she replaced the receiver, very thoughtfully, on to its resting-place.

III

THE SECOND PERSON TO leave Number Five Linden Terrace that rainy morning was Martin Bowling. The best way for him to reach his office, so Walter Tibbit had explained to him in the bar at the Reindeer the night before, would be to walk across the Common and to take a tram-car to the Oval, there to change into another tram, going south. This he was now doing.

It was a pity, he thought, that he should wake up his first morning in the new home to find such a depressing day. But as his sister Joyce had just pointed out, their move to Clapham Common was going to be an improvement from every point of view, especially as they were now so conveniently situated for their respective offices. On a fine morning, too, he would enjoy the walk across the Common.

It was certainly a good thing that they had moved in during the fine weather yesterday, he thought. It would have been depressing to-day, with this heavy rain, which had already soaked the bottoms of his trousers as he walked up the street. But, above all, he was relieved that Muswell Hill and its associations were now a thing of the past. His family were going to start a new life here. Alice Turner could still live in that house two doors from theirs, next to the old timber yard, but she could never enter into their lives again. His father had flaunted his unfaithfulness before his mother's eyes long before Martin was of an age to understand such things, and the secret gifts that his father had made to Alice Turner during his lifetime had been largely responsible for the failure of his business, drastically affect-

ing the finances of his family and leaving Martin, personally, with his savings reduced to only one hundred pounds in War Bonds. But there was still a chance that their old neighbour, Mr. Thompson, would insure his life for one thousand pounds and the commission on that case would be especially convenient just now, Martin reflected, as he passed the church on the corner and came to the Common.

And the Tibbits seemed neighbourly people, especially Walter, who had held forth at length at the bar of the Reindeer the night before, extolling the virtues of Clapham Common, stressing how pleasant it was for him, now that he had companionable people living in the house. It was a pity, though, that he had introduced himself so clumsily to the Tibbits' daughter just now; she seemed such a very refined type of a girl. And as he walked towards the trams, he found himself reviewing the events of the last twenty-four hours.

The half-day off from his office, which his Branch Manager, Mr. Thistlewaite, had granted him in order that he could superintend the move; meeting the Tibbits; Joyce's pleasurable excitement on her return; going for their supper to that café in the High Street, which had been specially recommended by their landlord, whom he had found waiting for him at the gate when they returned home, and who had immediately taken him off to the Reindeer, to ply him with hospitality. Returning home again, he had found that it was too late to begin any real unpacking that night, and after ensuring that his mother and sister were comfortably installed in their back bedroom, he switched on the light in his own room, to take stock of it more critically.

The bed had been made hurriedly by Joyce whilst he and Walter Tibbit had been drinking at the Reindeer. It stood on the right-hand side, facing the door, and left little clear-

ance when the door was opened. There was one window which he found, as he drew the linen blind aside, overlooked an identical one next door, where the Potters lived, so Mr. Tibbit had explained, and he saw that a light was still burning there. The desk, to which Martin had referred when talking to Walter Tibbit in the afternoon, was against the left-hand wall and was covered, at that moment, with a heap of books, a wooden bookshelf, some framed photographs, and boxes of varying descriptions. There were two chairs in the room, one a basket-work arm-chair and the other of the cane-seated wooden variety. The wallpaper seemed faded and there was a round damp stain above the desk, which Martin quickly decided could be hidden effectively if his wooden bookshelf were hung there. The pattern of the wallpaper he saw, as he cast his eyes around the room, was of rambler roses climbing up an intricate system of lattice-work, and the colour of the roses varied from pink to light brown, where the sun had played upon them for many years. The woodwork had been grained to represent light oak, but constant cleaning had worn away the stain in places, especially on the door, to which a large brass hook had been screwed. Martin took off his sports coat and hung it there, before walking over to his desk and looking through the litter which was heaped upon its hide-covered top.

In rummaging amongst the debris, he came across a framed photograph, which he casually picked up, holding it in both hands for some moments before walking over and placing it on the shelf above the gas-fire; and he found himself standing before that picture for a considerable time. He remembered the night so well, towards the end of the war, when Preston Daley had given him that photograph and had signed it in the Mess, grumbling expressively about the nib. Preston had been awarded the Military Cross and the leading London photographers had, at once, offered him complimentary sittings. Typical of Preston's sense of humour,

he had been religiously to each one, accepting their generous offers, without obligation, so that Preston had a goodly array of free photographs to distribute, all of which had been handed out in the Mess on that very riotous evening, and many of the inscriptions that he had written on them had been quite unprintable. Martin remembered that night, too, as, for the first and last time, he had been a little drunk. When he awoke next morning he found himself in bed, with the complimentary photograph of Preston Daley lying on the floor of his hut. Someone had trodden on one corner of it, and to hide the heel-mark from view the picture-framer had framed the photograph with an oval mount, which had also, in this case, hidden the more unprintable portions of Preston's inscription.

It was fortunate that Martin had been a little drunk that evening; otherwise he would never have dared to have asked Preston for his photograph. To be frank, Martin had always been a little awed by this tall young subaltern, who seemed to treat life as such a very gay affair, and he had been further awed by the knowledge that Preston was heir to a baronetcy. He remembered their first meeting so well. His mother had come to the station to see him off, his father being busy at Woolwich Arsenal, which had been his war-time occupation. It was the first occasion that Martin had appeared in an officer's tunic and he had found the salutes of his old comrades a little disconcerting. Then he had walked up the steps to the Orderly Room and had knocked, a little nervously, at the door.

"Come in!" he had heard a cheery voice call, and he had found Preston Daley sitting with his legs on the table, balancing a swagger cane on his forehead.

"Hello," had been Preston's greeting. "You want the Adjutant, I expect. I'm only the Orderly Officer. But even old Square Guts can't do this. Look!" And the swagger cane had continued to sway unsteadily.

"Square Guts?"

"The C.O."

"Oh."

Presently, when the cane had fallen on to the Orderly Room table, Preston had laughed uproariously.

"Reporting for duty?"

"Yes."

"Got the D.C.M., I see."

"Oh—well," and Martin had shrugged his shoulders awkwardly.

"My name's Daley. What's yours?"

"Bowling—Martin Bowling."

"How-d'you-do?" and a hand was outstretched. "We're moving out of this hole in a day or so. I suppose you know."

"Yes. I only came home to buy my uniform, and was drafted here right away. They told me at the War Office that I'd be going back almost immediately."

"Well, you know all about the Front, then. I haven't been out there yet. Still,"—and he had picked up the swagger cane and was balancing it again—"I expect I'll know soon enough!" And then: "I'll show you the way to the Mess in a moment. Can't leave here myself, yet. I'm the ruddy Orderly Officer, you see."

Martin remembered, even then, a feeling of self-consciousness in the presence of this young subaltern, with his black shiny hair brushed across his forehead, his fresh complexion and his perfect features, who seemed to treat the world—and war—as if it were some very gay experience. Martin wondered what had become of him. He wondered, too, if Preston would remember giving him that photograph and what he would think if he knew that it now held pride of place on the shelf of his bedroom in Linden Terrace. For over a year they had been together and they had ended the war at the Regimental Depot at Aldershot, both having been wounded about the same time and drafted home. Their

ways, in time of peace, lay poles apart. But Martin had always kept that photograph.

He remembered how he had once dined at Preston's parents' house in Belgrave Square, and how he had felt indescribably ill-at-ease and had kept dropping his starched serviette. The grandeur of the house had made him feel infinitely small. It was the first occasion that he had entered such a house, except when he had once been on a small fire claim with Mr. Jenkins, and they had called at Lord Morland's house in Grosvenor Street. But he had only been there because Mr. Jenkins, proud of his claim-settling abilities, had taken Martin into his department and was showing him how to settle small fire claims. On that occasion, the only person who had spoken to him was Lord Morland's butler. When dining with the Prestons, an even more magnificent footman had taken his greatcoat and was among those waiting upon him at table.

Martin picked up the photograph once more, holding it in his hands as he read that part of the inscription which was not hidden by the mount. Then he smiled to himself, and replaced it on the shelf in his new room.

He began undressing, folding his trousers carefully and placing them under the mattress, which took a little longer than usual, as Joyce had made the bed rather carelessly, and in lifting up the mattress the bedclothes had become disarranged. So he re-made his bed, making sure that his trousers would not be badly creased. As he removed his socks some moments later, he found that the boards were cold to his feet, and he wished that he had had the carpets and lino laid before moving in, but that also must be a job for to-morrow. And he reflected, with a smile, that his landlord, Walter Tibbit, had already offered to give him a hand with that, being an expert, he assured Martin, in laying lino. Joyce, too, had promised to make him some new curtains, which should be ready in a day or so, and when these were

up, his first bed-sitting-room should look quite presentable. It was going to be quiet up here, too, and, with the winter coming on, his gas-fire should make it very cosy when he sat up here with his books. And Joyce had offered to re-line and darn his old patchwork quilt, which had covered his bed ever since he could remember. That should improve the appearance of the room as well. In fact, it was typical of Joyce that she seemed to be as interested in the comfort of his new bed-sitting-room as in her own room at the back. It was a pity, though, that his father's bankruptcy had prevented her from continuing with her games, Martin reflected, as he sat on the edge of his bed. In the days when he had shouted himself hoarse on the touch-line, there had been talks of her playing hockey for the County, which was why Uncle Henry had wanted her to go in for athletics properly and become a games' mistress at one of the big schools. Yet she had quickly hidden her disappointment, having entered with zest into suburban store life instead, and was now in the Piece Goods Department at Brown Brothers. If only her figure was not so shapeless she might look quite pretty, he thought, as he continued with his undressing. Her legs were too fat, and as she only stood five feet high and her hips were so large, she presented rather a curious appearance—which she, herself, was the first to laugh at. "What! with my hips!" she would say, whenever they looked in a shop window at sale times and he would suggest the sort of dress that might suit her. One day, he supposed, she would get married, but it was good to know that she was still at home, especially as his mother seemed suddenly to have become so frail and would now need more constant attention. Joyce was so capable. Perhaps he had better go once more and make sure that they were really comfortable in the back bedroom.

"Have you set the alarm, Joyce?" he called at their door, a few moments later.

"Yes, for half-past six."

"Good. Everything all right?"

"Fine. Call if you're wanting anything."

"I will."

"Good night, Martin," his mother called.

"Good night."

As he walked back to his own room, he heard footsteps coming up the stairs, and looking over the banisters he saw a man, in a felt hat, walking up. This must be Mr. James, he thought, and he stood for a moment, hoping to get a better view of the felt-hatted figure, who was carrying a raincoat over his arm, but the front-room door had closed and the landing light had been switched off before Martin had a chance to see him. He returned then quietly to his own room, switched off the light and got into bed.

He remembered nothing more until the morning, when he felt the pressure of Joyce's fingers on his shoulders.

"It's twenty to seven," she said. "I've put the kettle on."

"Oh—it's you!"

"I'm going to give Mother her breakfast in bed. You can get your shaving water out of the geyser. I've tried it. It gets quite hot, but you must regulate the water in a small stream, Martin."

With that, Joyce wandered from the room, her woollen nightdress brushing the floor.

Martin sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. His bedclothes seemed in disorder and he felt dull and heavy, as if he had not slept, and he realized that he had forgotten to open his window. He left his bed and pulled his trousers from under the mattress, to find that they were badly creased; he had evidently moved in his restlessness and the creases in his trousers had suffered. He foraged in his suitcase and produced a clean linen collar, laying out his clothes carefully on his bed, before slipping on his dressing-gown and wander-

ing, sleepily, into the front room. Joyce was at the gas-stove, putting some rashers of bacon into a frying-pan.

"Mother's worrying over your taking a cab yesterday," she said. "She mentioned it last night and again this morning. Said she could easily have walked."

"Forget it," Martin said, walking to the front window. "What a day!"

"She seems a bit done up this morning."

"Yes," Martin agreed. "I'm afraid she's been doing too much. We'll have to take more care of her, Joyce. Wish we could get her away for a bit."

"Not much chance of that," Joyce replied.

"I don't know. Those friends of Uncle Henry. They might take her. Somerset ought to be all right at this time of year."

"I doubt if she'd go without us," Joyce said.

"I'll talk to Uncle Henry."

Martin sat for a while on the window-ledge watching the rain pattering down on the window-sill, collecting in small streams and then being carried away with the wind. Linden Terrace looked deserted and rainswept this morning. The milkman, in his oilskin coat, was delivering milk opposite.

"Did we order any milk?" he asked.

"No, Mother's arranging that to-day. Mr. Tibbit lent us some meantime. And you'd better get washed and shaved, because I'm cooking your breakfast now, too."

Martin rose, then, and wandered into the partitioned-off bathroom and lighted the geyser. The water, as Joyce had said, became quite hot if you ran it through in a small stream, and he returned, presently, to his room for his shaving things, to find that Joyce was still standing by the gas-stove, the Japanese screen being conveniently folded near by.

"Needn't start so early to-day, Martin," she called, brightly.

"No. You needn't, either."

"No."

As Martin walked into the bathroom, he found that the geyser was pouring out steam in vast quantities, and that the right-hand section of the bay window, which formed the window to the bathroom, was covered with steam. He took time over his toilet, and, passing through the living-room ten minutes later, he found that breakfast was already laid for two and that a most appetizing smell permeated the room.

"I got some special streaky bacon from the store, Martin. Don't let it spoil."

"No."

"And step downstairs and ask Mrs. Tibbit if she'll lend us a small pot of marmalade till to-night."

"I can't very well do that," he said.

"Why?"

"Well—I mean it's a bit early in the morning, Joyce, to go knocking people up, isn't it?"

"No. The old chap gets up at seven. He told me. And he insisted that I came down for anything I was short of," and Joyce was placing rashers on to her mother's plate on the tray. "Run along, Martin. It'll all spoil."

"Which room do I knock at?" he called from his room some moments later.

"Go right down to the kitchen."

"All right."

"And if that's the postman," Joyce called, as a loud knocking was heard at the front door downstairs, "see if there's anything for us."

Martin finished tying his boot-lace and left his room. There was no sound from the James' quarters, he noticed as he passed, but he saw a strange girl stooping over the door-mat as he turned at the lower landing. This girl was fair and lithe, unlike Mrs. James, whom he had met yesterday. As

she stood up, she reminded Martin of a Shepperson drawing that he had once seen in *Punch*.

"Good morning," she smiled, looking up. "You're Mr. Bowling, I suppose."

"Yes—and you?" Martin asked, puzzled.

"I'm Carol Tibbit."

"Of course!" and Martin came hurriedly down the remaining stairs. "You sleep next to the kitchen, don't you?" and he held out his hand.

She laughed, a gay infectious laugh.

"Really!" she said, "is that the extent of my fame?"

"I mean," Martin explained, blushing, he knew, and wishing that he had introduced himself less gauchely, "I remember your mother telling me yesterday. And, of course, I didn't know who you were, you see."

She withdrew her hand laughingly.

"You're up early, anyway," she said.

"Yes, my sister and I have an early start. It looks as though you do, too."

"Yes," she smiled, "I also am a world's worker."

"City?"

"Yes."

"I used to be. I'm working more or less locally now."

"Daddy told me."

"A wretched morning, isn't it?"

"Awful!"

They stood for a moment, Martin fingering his tie, she running casually again through the mail.

"I suppose there is nothing for me?" he asked.

"No," she smiled. "They're all for us. They look mostly like bills, though."

"Quarter Day, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"I hate Quarter Days," he said.

"I used to."

"Don't you now?"

"No," she smiled. "Were you wanting Daddy?"

"Well, no—as a matter of fact, I only wanted to know if I could borrow a pot of marmalade till to-night."

She laughed again. He was not sure that she was not laughing at him, and it made him feel even more ill-at-ease. He watched her long, tapering fingers collecting her letters and noticed that she was wearing a grey striped tailor-made, which fitted her beautifully. Beneath, she wore a white linen blouse, with a ruffle.

"I'm sure we can do that for you," she said. "Wait there a moment," and she hurried along the passage and down into the kitchen.

Martin stood by the hat-stand. What a clumsy way he had introduced himself, he thought. Perhaps it was meeting that way and being taken unawares. Besides, he had a headache this morning. Usually, he was alive when he awoke and felt fit and healthy, as Miss Tibbit obviously was to-day. He remembered the clearness of her skin and the whiteness of her teeth, which were beautifully even. Her hair was pretty, too, and the wave in it was natural, he was sure.

"I'm afraid it isn't a full pot," he heard her say, as she came up the stairs. "But I expect it's enough for now."

Martin realized that there was a delicate scent about her hair and an infinite freshness, as she removed the grease paper cover from the jar, and they both peered inside.

"Rather!" he said. "I should think so."

"And Mother says the butcher calls about ten for orders."

"Thank you, I'll tell my sister."

"I expect we'll be meeting often."

"Yes."

"Well, I hope there'll be enough marmalade."

"Oh—rather."

They exchanged a smile, and Martin walked up the stairs

again. There was still no sound from the James' quarters. As he entered the front room, Joyce was finishing her breakfast, her mouse-coloured hair drawn back from her temples into its scraggy bun.

"I just met Tibbit's daughter," he said, placing the marmalade on the table and sitting down to his breakfast.

"I met her last night. Sweet, isn't she?"

"Yes—she is."

"Dundee!" Joyce exclaimed, examining the pot, and helping herself.

"And she told me to tell you that the butcher calls about ten for orders."

"Right. Mother wants sausages for supper. Suit you?"

"Suits me," Martin replied, adding: "Let's have some bubble and squeak with them."

"I'll tell Mother," Joyce said, as she left the table, carrying her marmaladed toast in her hand.

Ten minutes later, Martin was walking downstairs and out into the rainswept street.

Yes, everything was working out very satisfactorily, he thought, as he changed his tram at the Oval and crossed the road, his opened umbrella acting like a sail, but he must not sleep with his window closed again and wake up heavy like this. He entered another tram, going towards Camberwell, and in a few minutes he was walking up the path to his office.

The Camberwell Green Branch of the Atlantic Insurance Company were very fortunately housed. In the more prosperous days of Camberwell, "Oxted Lodge" had been the home of one of its leading citizens. It stood back from the road, with a small carriage drive. Its brick walls, at one time in its history, had had a covering of stucco, which was now periodically painted cream. It was a large double-fronted house, its door being reached by walking up five steps,

under a portico with stone pillars, the steps being carefully whitened each morning by Mrs. Green, the caretaker. On the front of the portico, gilt letters were supported on a steel frame, announcing that Fire, Accident and Life Insurances were conducted within. The windows on the ground floor were, at the lower half, covered with a brown metal screen, on which the Atlantic Insurance Company again announced its business in faded gold letters. The floor above was sub-let to two firms, one a lawyer, the other an architect, the whole of the Atlantic Company's business being conducted on the ground floor. Martin ran up the five steps and shook his umbrella in the porch. He entered the office, turning to the left, past the counter, and, lifting up the hinged portion at the end, he walked through the large room which had, in its more prosperous days, been the dining-room of the house. He passed the isolated desk of Mr. Drake, the chief clerk, and through to where the pegs for the staff were fixed to a wall in the alcove to the left, where he hung up his coat and hat. He went into the cloak-room and dried his face, brushing his hair with the brush supplied by the Company, one end of which had already started to moult, and returned into the main office, to find that he was still the only arrival. Again he felt gratified that they had moved to Linden Terrace. From Muswell Hill it had been a long journey, but when the weather was fine this journey was going to be mere child's play. He walked along the counter, to make sure all the racks were filled with proposal forms, and he began arranging some of the company's new "eye-catching" literature on the counter, in the shape of a fan.

"Lucky you didn't move to-day, Martin," Peter Thomas said, as he arrived in a soaked raincoat. "What a day!" and he stood for a moment, shaking himself rather like a dog. "The bottoms of my trousers are soaking. You're earlier than usual, aren't you?"

“Well, hang it, Peter, I only live round the corner now.”

“Of course,” Thomas said, looking up. “How’s it going to work out?”

“Fine, I think.”

IV

JOYCE BOWLING HAD TO clock-in at the staff entrance at Brown Brothers at 8.45 a.m., and would, therefore, in the ordinary way, have been the first to leave Linden Terrace for her work.

That morning, however, an exception was being made. On account of the move, permission had been graciously granted to her by Mr. Heavitree, the buyer of the Piece Goods Department, to arrive later.

"I grant you," he had said, before leaving the store the night before, "that except at sale-times, customers do not arrive here sharply at nine o'clock. Nevertheless," he added, holding the lapels of his coat as one about to address a large gathering, "it is a rule of the house, Miss Bowling, and regulations are regulations. At the same time, we buyers are given a little licence, and so long as the efficiency of the department is not imperilled, I do not mind granting you a little time off to-morrow morning to help your mother settle in."

"Thank you, Mr. Heavitree."

"But you must be in not later than ten."

"No, Mr. Heavitree."

Mr. Heavitree, his hands still on his lapels, cocked his head on one side.

"Funny," he said, "about those printed chiffons, isn't it? Remarkable! Never been wrong before."

"It's been a bad summer, of course," Joyce replied thoughtfully.

"Gave it a window before the summer sales, too—and it's still on our hands. Remarkable," he added, scratching his chin. "Remarkable."

Joyce watched him. He was obviously ill-at-ease. His hands had left the lapels of his coat and were nervously jingling some coins in his trousers pocket.

"Can't always be right, I suppose, but I thought printed chiffons would be the rage this summer. Never would have placed that large order otherwise," he added, scratching his chin once more in deep reflection.

"Still, as I say, the summer has been a very disappointing one, Mr. Heavitree. You couldn't have foreseen that, could you? No one could."

"That don't interest the Chief, I'm afraid, though."

"No."

"Very nice for evening gowns, too. Furthermore, I see that they're using it in Paris just now for nightwear and *négligées*."

"Style tendencies, I'm afraid, don't seem to interest our customers."

"As you say, Miss Bowling. *Our* customers wear woollens."

"Yes."

The coins jingled once more in Mr. Heavitree's trousers pocket.

"Remarkable," he added again. "Thought printed chiffons would be the rage, too."

"Couldn't we be the first to follow Paris, Mr. Heavitree?" Joyce suggested a moment later. "And make a big show of made-up goods?"

"The Chief don't agree with educating the public. Can't afford to. Not at our prices, anyway."

"No."

"That's for the bigger shops to do."

"Still, I don't see why we shouldn't have a few garments

made up and displayed, Mr. Heavitree. We might get a showing in the window that way, too."

Mr. Heavitree ceased jingling his coins and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You mean," he asked, "have some *négligées* and special lingerie made up on stylish lines, perhaps cut to special patterns from our present stock, and then try and get a showing in the corner of the underwear window?"

"Yes."

"Well," Mr. Heavitree agreed, "that's not a bad idea, I must say. Wouldn't cost much, either. I'll have to have a word with Mr. Samuels in the morning about that."

"We might even co-operate with some of the pattern people—*Vogue*, and so on. We might even sell their patterns in the department, as well."

"Yes," Mr. Heavitree agreed. "We might even do that, Miss Bowling. We might even do that."

"It's pretty obvious that we can't get a window for printed chiffons late in September, so it seems a good way of getting round it, doesn't it?"

"It does. It does," Mr. Heavitree agreed, quite excitedly. "And I'm sure that Mr. Samuels would give us a corner in his window if I talk to him and explain the idea. Underwear are getting a window next week, I happen to know. I'll speak to him first thing in the morning. Really, I believe you've struck a very good idea, Miss Bowling. It might start a vogue locally, too."

"I'm glad," Joyce said. "I do hope so."

"Very awkward if we had all that stock left on our hands, you know."

"Yes."

"There's a meeting of buyers in the Chief's room at nine-thirty to-morrow. This stock of chiffons is sure to come up for discussion again. I'd better see Mr. Samuels before the meeting."

"I should, Mr. Heavitree."

Mr. Heavitree seemed deep in thought as Joyce waited, listening once more to the jingling of coins.

"Well, it will be all right then, if I arrive about ten in the morning?"

"Yes. Quite all right, Miss Bowling," and Mr. Heavitree looked at his watch. "Well," he added, more brightly than of late, "I think you've hit on a very good idea. Now I must get along, too. The youngster has his bottle at eight and I want to see him."

"How is he?"

"Fine, thank you. Putting on weight every day. The dead spit of his poor mother. Good thing he isn't like me, I suppose," and Mr. Heavitree actually smiled. "Well, good night, Miss Bowling. I hope your move will prove successful from every point of view. Good night, and I thank you for the idea. I'll see Mr. Samuels first thing in the morning."

Joyce watched the lean figure of Mr. Heavitree walk out of the department, the back of one of his trousers legs caught up in the top of his boot, before hurrying down to the changing-room to catch Emily Jones as she was leaving, to advise her that for an hour next morning she would have a larger portion of the counter to look after. Then she hurried home, for the first time, to Linden Terrace.

At six-thirty next morning, the alarm clock in the back bedroom on the top floor of Number Five, Linden Terrace, had rung violently. Joyce awoke, and went immediately into the front room to put on the kettle. Entering Martin's room to call him, she was surprised to see Preston Daley's photograph standing alone on Martin's shelf. How funny, she thought! Everything in disorder and nothing unpacked, but he has taken the trouble to rummage round and find Mr. Daley's photograph. He never sees Mr. Daley now. In fact, they have not met since the war. Yet that photograph had

stood on Martin's shelf at Muswell Hill ever since the war, and the first—and only—thing that he has done in the way of unpacking is to search for Mr. Daley's photograph and to stand it on his shelf. Men are funny, she reflected.

But everything seemed a little strange that morning. A new house, a new gas-stove to manipulate, and nothing unpacked, as they had sat too long over their supper the night before at Bellamy's Café, and had felt too tired to start unpacking when they returned home. And, of course, Martin had gone off almost immediately to the public-house with the new landlord, who had been waiting for him at the gate, in his straw hat, as they walked down the street. That had interfered with their plans, too. But it was typical of Martin's good nature that he had gone with him, she thought. As Martin had said over supper the night before, "I can't disappoint the old fellow. He has been very helpful over the move." But it was quite obvious that Martin's drinking had not agreed with him. He looked rather worn this morning. He seemed depressed, too. Joyce missed his vocal exercises from the bathroom. All that she had heard to-day was the hissing of the new geyser. But she had sent him off to his work in good time and he had seemed more cheerful before leaving.

Dear Martin! Of course, as her father had always said, she should have been the boy and he the girl. She was big-boned and ungainly, whilst he was slight and as sensitive as a woman. His delicate mouth curled up at one side when he smiled. His eyes, which were, she supposed, his most arresting feature, were surrounded by long black lashes. The girls in the store had so often envied them, when she had taken Martin to the staff dances. Those eyes reflected his real character; they were brown and deep set. They smiled kindly at you, as you took his hand on first acquaintance. They looked at you sympathetically when in trouble. They lighted up and joined in your happiness, when you were

happy. Otherwise, his face was cast in a most ordinary mould, Joyce realized. His hair was mouse coloured, like her own, only his was thicker and it parted rather nicely at the side. His body was slight and his shoulders were sloping, so that in badly fitting clothes he could look completely nondescript. She remembered him in the war, how beautiful he had looked in his officer's tunic after the ill-fitting uniform supplied to him as a private. Her shock, she realized, too, when she had seen him return to his old pre-war suit on demobilization. But the sports coat that she had bought for him cheaply through Mr. Body of the Men's Wear Department at Brown Brothers, and which he had worn yesterday, had suited him beautifully. She remembered thinking how well he had looked in that, over their table in Bellamy's Café the night before. The padded shoulders of that coat had filled him out. She had noticed the waitress, or so she thought, looking at him, too, through heavy eyelids, as she stood with her back to the wall, listening discreetly to their conversation during supper. For Martin, Joyce felt a love greater than that of a sister for a brother. Martin was her life. She felt, too, immeasurably older than Martin, although she was actually three years his junior. She encouraged and became thrilled by the confidences that he gave to her. She reacted to, and joined with him in his enthusiasms. Just now it was for new curtains in the front room, for he disliked the red plush curtains that had hung in their sitting-room at Muswell Hill all their lives, and which had, for a moment, seemed destined to reappear in the front room at Linden Terrace. Now that there seemed a possibility of their old neighbour, Mr. Thompson, really insuring his life, on which Martin would earn the commission, Martin's first thought had been to get patterns and to choose the material for these curtains. Joyce had brought many swatches home with her from Brown Brothers and they had sat examining them together in their Muswell Hill house prior to the move.

And she must hurry the finishing of the curtains for his new bed-sitting room. He seemed so very excited about those. Yes, she loved Martin's enthusiasms. She loved his kindness, too. He knew nothing of squalor, except in his surroundings. His was a beautiful mind, she thought—honest and clean. His very simplicity made him more attractive in the eyes of the girls in Brown Brothers. "What a sweet smile your brother has," became on second acquaintance; "What an unusual boy your brother is, Joyce—he doesn't seem to belong in this world. He's too nice." And that was true, in Joyce's view; Martin was too kind. He seemed to be thinking always of others, and his unselfishness had been a byword in the family ever since she could remember. In the old days, he would escort her to her hockey games and would shout himself hoarse on the touchline, holding her coat in readiness for the end of the game, lest she should catch a chill. And often he had refused more exciting invitations in order to accompany her home after the game. It was not to be wondered at that she took especial delight in looking after him now, and doing everything that she could for him. Martin's happiness was all that counted in her little world, and she was glad that he had seemed more cheerful before leaving for his office.

She insisted on washing up the dishes, in spite of her mother's protest. Why should she have asked Mr. Heavitree for this time off otherwise? And as she stood looking out of the window, drying the plates over the sink in the newly made bathroom, she realized that this was certainly not the weather to help move that stock of printed chiffons. Poor Mr. Heavitree! There had been many arguments, she remembered, over the original ordering of that chiffon. But Mr. Heavitree, who had joined Brown Brothers with a big reputation, had won the day. Mr. Beaven, the Managing Director, had been especially dubious, but Mr. Heavitree had staked his reputation on 1920 being the year of all years for

printed chiffons. And now the summer had been bad and chiffons had not sold. . . . No wonder poor Mr. Heavitree seemed so worried these days. In fact, since his wife's death, his anxious face had seemed to become a permanency. She remembered so well Mr. Heavitree's haggard appearance during his wife's confinement. Then the day when he did not appear in the store, the news of his wife's death, and the wreath, the subscriptions for which Joyce had collected. Poor Mr. Heavitree! Unlike so many buyers in Brown Brothers, who were rude, arrogant and often dishonest, Mr. Heavitree was kind. Not many of those buyers would have given her permission to arrive late this morning, she realized. Mr. Heavitree's face looked pinched nowadays, too, as if his digestion was out of order, or perhaps he was not eating enough. But he was a sympathetic little man. He had been kind, even, to Mildred Black when she had had a baby by Mr. Tooth of the Haberdashery.

Joyce hoped so much that her suggestion of making up some of the stock into made-up goods might help him out of his difficulty. Mr. Heavitree's reputation, which he prized so highly, would suffer if the stock did not move. The girls in the store had so often laughed at Mr. Heavitree's puny physique. As one of them had once said: "He looks rather like a tired sparrow," which, in a way, was true. His head was small and his nose lean and long, and at times it *did* look like a beak. His skin was grey and sallow, and his hair sparse and greying and brushed in streaks across his head. He always wore a short black coat and striped trousers, sometimes varying his appearance with a white slip under his waistcoat. As this slip appeared at frequent intervals, only to disappear again, it was generally understood that Mr. Heavitree only possessed one slip, which his wife washed for him at home. But that slip had not appeared since his wife's death. . . . His curious appearance was accentuated by the large ready-made cravat which he always

wore beneath his winged collar. It had been discovered that it was a made-up cravat, after dust had appeared in its creases. . . . And this sudden nip in the air, she realized, as she dried the last plate and turned away from the window, was hardly the sort of weather to help him to sell that chiffon. . . .

She walked into the back room, spoke of further domestic details with her mother, and removed the breakfast tray from the bed, before opening the mahogany wardrobe and lifting a heavy blue coat from the scanty array of garments hanging there.

"I'm afraid I'll have to get another mackintosh this year," she said.

"Yes, dear."

"And I won't leave *that* in the train!"

"No, dear. I never thought people could be so dishonest."

"Well, it *was* a bit shabby. But still, there were a few more years of wear in it, I suppose," and she slipped into her coat, selecting a small black straw hat, with a shiny ornament in front, which she had bought for her father's funeral; a cheap little hat that she would not mind spoiling. Then, with a short umbrella under her arm, she kissed her mother good-bye and walked slowly down the stairs. Mr. Tibbit came out of the front room at that moment.

"Your brother was off early," he called cheerfully. "What time will he be back?"

"I really don't know," Joyce replied, walking down the remaining stairs. "He's working late, I know. He always does round Quarter Days."

"Oh—he'll be late?"

"I expect so."

Mr. Tibbit stood thoughtfully.

"Too bad," he said. "I was going to give him a hand with his carpets and lino this evening. There was a bit of varnishing to do, too."

"Well, I really don't know what to say," Joyce said, after a pause. "I know he's going to be late for supper. Which reminds me, could Mrs. Tibbit order us two pounds of pork sausages when the butcher calls?"

Mr. Tibbit's eyes brightened again. "Certainly! Just a minute," and he walked quickly to the top of the kitchen stairs. "Mother!" he called, "Miss Bowling says will you order two pounds of pork sausages when the butcher calls?" There was a mumbled reply from below. "That will be quite all right," he translated, beaming once more. "A wretched day. Still, it's good for the garden, I suppose. Take care you don't get wet, now," and he opened the front door. "Ought to have your mackintosh on, you know. My daughter did. You'll catch a bus at the top here. Drops you right off at Brown Brothers. Passes the door." And Joyce saw him still standing in the doorway as she opened her umbrella and battled her way up Linden Terrace.

Of course this move was going to make it very convenient getting to her office, now, she thought. One bus all the way, as Mr. Tibbit had pointed out. The heavy morning traffic had diminished, the majority of her new neighbours had caught their buses and Undergrounds in time to reach their offices not later than 9.30 a.m. In spite of this, Joyce, too, had to fight her way on to the bus, owing to the rain, which drove the ordinary walkers into the bus. She found herself standing inside hanging to a strap, and wondered why it was that no men ever seemed to get up to offer her a seat. But still, she thought, I'm as strong as they are, I suppose. I can stand as well as they can. And she foraged, with difficulty, for her purse and paid the conductor the twopence, which she found was to be her new fare, making a mental calculation that two shillings a week would now be all that she had to set aside for travelling.

How splendid, she thought again, this move to Linden Terracel! From every point of view it had been a wise

decision. She alighted later from her bus opposite Brown Brothers and ran across the street. In a moment she was saying good morning to Bob Mitchell, the doorkeeper, and taking her card from the rack she clocked in at nine-fifty. She hurried up the stone stairs to the changing-room and took off her blue coat and black straw hat and hung them on a peg, amidst an array of damp smelling clothing hanging from the other pegs. Then she donned the black satin dress, with muslin collar, which was regulation for the store, gave a hurried glance in the mirror and walked quickly into the department.

A few drab-looking women were scattered around the large square department, examining fabrics with most unhappy faces. Emily Jones was attending to a customer. Joyce walked behind her and took up her position at the counter, as Emily placed the small ladder against the wall behind her and began climbing up to reach the velvets on the top shelf.

“Move go all right, Joyce?” she whispered.

“Fine, thanks.”

V

THE FOURTH PERSON TO leave Number Five Linden Terrace on that rainy morning was Mr. Herbert James, who had an appointment with Mr. Goldberg at eleven o'clock. A chance meeting with Laddie Williams, in Shaftesbury Avenue, the day before had been responsible for this introduction.

Yesterday morning, he had risen early, leaving the house at seven-thirty, which was his usual time. As she cooked his breakfast, his wife had inquired anxiously about the severe illness of his foreman's wife, and as she removed his raincoat from before the stove, she held it to her face, making sure that it was properly aired.

"I forgot to tell you, Herbert," she said, "that I've ordered a new serge costume. It's coming to-day."

"Oh."

"Only three and a half guineas. Given away, really. Sale price, you know. But I'll be needing something with the winter coming on, anyway. You don't mind—do you?"

"No, dear," Herbert replied, thoughtfully.

"So hurry home and then I'll be wearing it for you," she added, as she handed him the coat. "You always liked me in blue, didn't you?"

"Yes, dear."

"I see that the Tibbits' daughter has just bought herself a new grey costume. I had thought of having one like hers. But she might have thought that I'd copied her."

"Well, she wouldn't have been far wrong, would she?"

"I suppose not," Maisie smiled. "Still, a very nice girl is that Tibbit girl. I had a talk with her on the stairs last night. Nice taste she's got. Quite refined, too, really."

"Yes, she is that. Pretty, as well."

"Surprising with parents like that, isn't it?"

"How? They're nice enough, Maisie. Seem very anxious to be friendly, too. We ought to ask them up to our place sometime."

Maisie shook her head.

"I don't want to go mixing with the people round here," she said. "It's bad enough to have to live this way at all."

"Some of the people round about are quite nice," he replied, looking down at his felt hat, as he brushed it with his hand.

"Well, what about that Bert Freeman! Do you expect me to mix with common people like that?"

"I'm not talking about Bert Freeman, though he seems all right to me. But Mr. Tibbit is a nice old chap, Maisie. You can't deny that. Kind, too."

Maisie shook her head again.

"Too nosey for my liking," she said, kissing him lightly on the cheek. "Always wanting to know everybody's business."

She was about to wave over the banisters, but, seeing Walter Tibbit appear from below, she hastily withdrew.

"A fine day for the move, Mr. James," Mr. Tibbit beamed, at the bottom of the stairs.

"What move?"

"People are moving into the top floor this afternoon, you know. Name of Bowling."

"Oh, yes?"

"Better day for them than the people opposite at Number Ten had."

"Yes."

"Business all right?" Walter Tibbit called after him.

"Everything going all right in the business?"

Herbert turned at the gate.

"Oh, yes—quite, thank you."

"Good! I'm glad, Mr. James. Always like to hear of a neighbour doing well, you know. Bert Freeman, opposite, who's in the Brewery, he says that beer is the finest indication of the country's prosperity. And they're doing a fine trade just now."

"Is that so?"

"Well—so-long, Mr. James," a disappointed voice called after him and the front door was seen to close very slowly.

Herbert walked up Linden Terrace. *Three and a half guineas!* He had not expected that; especially just now. But he must not let Maisie know. . . . It was incongruous, he thought, that he should have sunk to such depths, when the world around him seemed so beautiful—fleecy clouds racing across a Mediterranean sky, the trees turning golden in the churchyard. Linden Terrace looked enchanted to-day. And the Common as he came to it, looked fresh after yesterday's rain. But how, he wondered, should he spend his time to-day? That was all important in his mind.

He walked to the bus stop and stood, meditatively, beside a small crowd of early workers. No, he would not take an omnibus. He had better walk, just as he had done in the torrential rain of yesterday. To-day was fine, anyhow, and his clothes had been thoroughly dried over the gas stove, and his feet did not squelch in his boots as he walked, now. He turned away as another bus approached, and commenced walking in the direction of Chelsea, his raincoat over his arm.

He did not mind where he walked, although, in his mind, the West End was his goal, for things happened in the West End. The sun was higher in the heavens, now, and there was a crispness in the air which exhilarated him as he trudged the endless back streets, taking his time before coming, at last, to the King's Road. But where and what

now, he wondered? He had already walked a long way. He might have sat in Battersea Park for a while, if he had thought of that sooner, so perhaps he would now make for St. James' Park. It would be more pleasant there than on the crowded pavements. He turned, then, and walked slowly along the King's Road, into Sloane Square, finally reaching the Park from Birdcage Walk, where he sat on the first seat that he came to, placing his raincoat thoughtfully beside him. . . . Three and a half guineas! Well, things could not drift indefinitely, he supposed. Something must happen soon, but how or what, he did not know. He tilted his felt hat to screen his eyes from the sun, and sat watching the children feeding the birds on the ornamental lake, the idle onlookers, the Park scavengers passing with their spiked sticks, and the leisurely figures on the gravel path. Around him this morning there seemed an infinite peace, contrasting vividly with the torment of his mind, from which lack of sleep in the first-floor back bedroom at Linden Terrace had taken an added toll. A child came presently to his seat to ask him the time, and, reaching for his waistcoat pocket, he remembered that his watch had been sold the week before. He rose hurriedly, then. Was there no peace, now? Must his degradation be brought home to him at every turn? He cursed, audibly, and hurried from the Park, reaching Piccadilly to find, by the clock at the Circus, that it was nearly half-past eleven. Four hours of his day, anyhow, had already passed.

"If it isn't Herbie!" a voice called after him in Shaftesbury Avenue. "Well," Laddie Williams cried, taking him by the arm, "fancy running across you at this hour of day! Which way are you going?"

"Oh—just up here."

"So am I. I'll walk with you. Haven't seen you for years. How's things?"

"Oh—how are they with you?"

"Mustn't grumble at all. Doing great, really. Are you still with the aeroplane factory?"

"Well—no."

"Left them—eh?"

"Yes."

"Long?"

"About five weeks."

"Where are you working now?"

"Well, you see, it's a bit difficult. I've only worked in aeroplane factories. I'm a bit limited. I'm a rigger by trade, you see."

"You mean, you're out of a job?"

"Yes. Temporarily."

"Anything in view?"

"Well, no. Not exactly. Aviation business is a bit quiet just now. No one knows what's going to happen. Most of the old Government contracts are completed, too."

"Come and have a drink," Laddie Williams said.

As they reached the saloon bar at the corner, they both went inside.

"Well, fancy seeing you again!" Laddie Williams repeated, after ordering two glasses of beer. "It must be four years, Herbie, since we met. Have you been down home at all lately?"

"No. Wales is a bit too far. Besides, I'm married now. I have to go a bit slow."

"Married—eh? Long?"

"Six months."

"And you're out of a job! That's bad. What does the wife say?"

"She doesn't know."

"How do you manage that?"

"Well," Herbert explained, "you see, I leave the house at the same time each day, and I come home at the same time each night, the same as I used to when I was working. I don't want her to know. It might worry her."

"But she's bound to find out."

"Yes, that's the trouble."

"That's bad," Laddie Williams repeated. "How do you spend your day, then?"

Herbert shrugged his shoulders.

"Going to the Free Libraries and looking at the 'Situations Vacant' in the newspapers, and trying the jobs that seem suitable. It's funny," he added, "how difficult it is to find work, Laddie. My landlord, this morning, said things were looking up, too. I thought things were going to be different when the war ended."

"Yes. It's hard for some, I must say. Here, let's have the same again. No, on me, because I'm doing all right. You keep your hands in your pockets. Here, Miss, the same again. Yes, two halves of bitter."

"Where are *you* working, Laddie?"

"Oh, I'm in the jazz business."

"How do you mean?"

"I'm in the dance band business. Do you remember how I used to play the bugle in the Boy's Brigade down home? Well, I'm playing saxophone, now. Believe me, boy, there's a wealth of money in a saxophone."

"Where do you play?"

"Gigs, mostly."

"Gigs?"

"Yes. Private parties. Different places every night. Sometimes I'm playing in some swell turn-out in Mayfair, and at others I'm playing in the suburbs, or some small dance hall. I make three guineas a night, that is from ten o'clock till two, apart from Time and Distance money. It takes time to get known, but once the boys know you, there's plenty of work about. I've played as many as four dances a week."

"Go on!"

"Oh, yes. Some of the boys work more than that, too. Thank you, Miss. Here's health, Herbie. And—luck, too."

"Cheerio."

"Of course, as I say, it takes time to get known."

"It must do."

"And the saxophone isn't altogether an easy instrument, either."

"I don't think I've seen one."

"Oh—a Mr. Adolphe Sax invented it. That's why it's called a saxophone. They're all the rage in America. Of course, I could have taken to the banjo, but you mark my words, the saxophone is going to be the thing of the future. Fancy you never seeing one, Herbie!"

"Well, I don't go out much now I'm married."

"But didn't you go out dancing before, with the missis?"

"No. I was saving pretty hard then, too."

"Well, you come up to my place some time. I'll show you."

"And you make as much as twelve guineas a week sometimes?"

"Yes, and I've made more, too."

"Well, good luck to you," Herbert said, drinking slowly.

"It's good to hear of someone doing so nicely."

"Is your dad still living in Merthyr Tydfil?" Laddie asked, replacing his glass on the counter.

"Yes. Things are very bad down there, too, I'm afraid."

"Of course, I've lost all touch with the place now. When I left there were no ties to keep me. I've often wondered though, how you were getting on. Do you remember the times we used to have? Takes you back a bit, doesn't it?"

"Yes. It certainly does."

"I suppose you never sing now?"

"I haven't sung—not since I left the choir."

"When your voice broke?"

"Yes. I worked in the pits after that."

"So you did. Found the Aeroplane factory better, eh?"

"It was more healthy than the mines, I suppose," Herbert

replied, still drinking slowly. "My Uncle Sidney, who brought me to London, do you remember him?"

"Your mother's brother?"

"Yes."

"Where's he now?"

"He's running a small coal business in Isleworth."

"Can't he help you, Herb?"

"I'd rather not ask him. It's funny, Laddie, but when you're out of work you feel you want to go and hide yourself. You don't want to go telling all your relations about it. That's really one of my troubles. You see, my wife's people are superior kind of folk. He's a butcher in Romford. He's got a small chain of shops down that way. Hake, by name. Joseph Hake. He didn't care for Maisie and me getting married. He never did, even from the first. He seemed to think that my being a rigger in the aeroplane factory wasn't good enough. She's a High School girl, and all that. He used to call me a 'factory hand' when he wanted to be particularly nasty, and believe me, Laddie, he *can* be nasty when he wants to."

"Stuck up—eh?"

"Yes, that's about what it is. But, of course, he gave Maisie a respectable home," he continued, after a pause. "And he still gives her a bit of an allowance. I never wanted it and my own opinion is that he did it just to make me feel uncomfortable, and to make her feel that she couldn't be dependent on me. To make her feel that she'd married beneath herself. Well, the thing that really worries me, Laddie, is that at the rate the money's going out, with nothing coming in—it's five weeks now—I'll soon have to start asking Maisie for something."

"Yes," Laddie agreed. "You wouldn't fancy doing that, I must say."

"No. That's a fact. I wouldn't."

"Still, if she's a proper sort of girl, Herbie, you shouldn't

worry yourself too much about that. For better or worse, don't the parsons say when they marry you?"

"Yes."

"Not that I've been in a chapel now for some years. Not since the choir days, I'd say. But I'm sorry, Herb, to hear you're tramping round like this. I really am. How about another glass? Ought to do you good."

"No thanks, Laddie. I'm not used to drink these days. It might go to my head. I have to be careful. I never was a one for drink, as you know. Thanks all the same. Which way are you going?" and Herbert picked up his raincoat from the stool beside him.

"I'm on my way to Archer Street. I don't suppose you've ever heard of that street?"

"No. I don't think I have."

"Well, that's where all the band boys meet, Herb. It's at the back of the Apollo Theatre. That's where we all go every day. It's a kind of Club. All we dance pro's stand around on the street there when we're on the look out for a job, the same as the theatrical pro's stand on the corner of Leicester Square. It's a sort of meeting-place. Supposing now, for example, that I was lucky enough to put a band in for a *Gig* and I wanted to engage the band myself. Well, all I'd do would be to walk down Archer Street and I'd find all the musicians I wanted. They just stand around there, chatting and smoking. I'm not looking for a job to-day, mind, as I'm playing a date to-night and another the day after to-morrow. But I go up there most days, whether I'm on a job or not. You meet all the fellows and it keeps you in touch. Why don't you come along some time? It's quite an education. I'd point out some of the big shots in the game, too. There's a trap-drummer up there who plays with Joe Field's Band, who makes his twenty quid a week regular. He's a fine boy with the sticks, mind you. But even so, it's big money. Oh yes, Herbie, there's money in the

jazz game all right. Pity you never took it up. And it hasn't properly started over here to my way of thinking."

"Well, of course, the way I play the piano—or used to—wouldn't be much good in your line, I suppose?"

Laddie Williams turned suddenly on his stool.

"Of course, you used to tickle the ivories, didn't you? Heavy stuff, sonatas and the like?"

"Yes, I used to like the piano," Herbert answered. "But I haven't touched one for a year, now."

"Yes," Laddie mused, a moment later, having sat looking at his empty glass, "but your playing wouldn't do in our game, I'm afraid, Herb. Not as I remember it. It's rhythm in our game. Strict tempo all the time. No, I'm afraid your style wouldn't do in a jazz band. A pity, though. I might have given you an intro. or two."

"Yes," Herbert agreed. "But I can't play dance stuff. Never could."

"Still," Laddie reflected, "there're other places where you might get fixed up. Cinemas, cafés, tea shops—any of those places that have a straight little outfit playing during meals."

"Well, it's over a year since I touched a piano," Herbert said.

"I'm not saying that I could fix you up, mind, and it's some time now since I heard you play. Perhaps you mightn't be good enough. Still, it's better work than sweating your guts out in some factory. That I can vouch for. After all, even if you had to play your heavy stuff for lunch *and* tea—well, you're finished about half-past six. And you don't have to be on the stand much before twelve-thirty. No, I reckon that a fellow can do a sight worse than playing with some small outfit in a café. It's not as well paid as my world, mind you, but it keeps the wolf from the door and it's not exactly slave driving, either. The only thing," he added, "is to find the spot to work in."

"Yes," Herbert answered, quietly, "that's the trouble I find everywhere."

"Have you got a piano in your place?"

"No. I'm in rooms."

"Which part?"

"Linden Terrace, Clapham."

"Humph! I haven't a piano in my place, either. I'd like to hear you play again," Laddie added thoughtfully. "Just to see whether you would be any good. Not that I'm a proper judge, mind you, of that sort of talent. Of course, I often go to one of Lyon's Corner Houses and I know the sort of stuff they play there—*The Skaters' Waltz*, *The Blue Danube*, Selections from the Operas, *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and the like, medleys of some of the old musical comedies, *The Londonderry Air*, some of the old waltzes—all of that sort of junk. . . ."

"Junk?"

"Well, to my way of thinking, Herb. That stuff isn't in my line, you see."

"Well, I don't know about the operatic stuff, Laddie," Herbert said, after reflection, "but I used to play most of the others. From music, of course. I used to sight-read pretty well."

"Well, most of those Johnnies play from music, too! Even pianists in the bands I play with usually have their music on the stand."

"A lot of new tunes to learn, I suppose."

Laddie laughed then.

"Tunes!" he said. "Look here, Herbie, if I introduce you to some of the boys, don't call them *tunes*. They're *numbers*, see? We don't talk about songs, or tunes, in our business. Everything's a number, see?"

"A number?"

"Yes, that's what we call them. If you talked about a *tune*, they'd know you for an amateur right away. You want to be careful of things like that in the profession. I've been in some bands where I knew a fellow for a bad player by the

way he talked—before he ever put the instrument to his lips. No, you want to be very careful not to give yourself away when you first start in the music business. After all, it's each man for himself, and the best man wins."

"After he's got his start."

Laddie Williams turned abruptly once more, sitting now on his high stool in front of the bar, his chin supported by his hand, as he leaned over the counter.

"Herb," he said, "I'd like to give you a hand. Really, it's too bad your being out of a job, married too. What do you think, yourself? Supposing you could get a job like that, would you take it?"

"I'd take anything," Herbert James said, replacing his raincoat on the stool. "Honest, Laddie, I'd jump at a chance like that. That is, if you think I could do it."

"I'd like to hear you play again," Laddie mused.

"There isn't a piano in our house, I'm afraid. The Tibbits live downstairs and the place above is empty, though I did hear this morning that it's been let and people are moving in to-day. I don't know anyone living round about, either. Maisie and I haven't mixed much with the folk in the neighbourhood. She likes to keep herself to herself, you know. And lately, I've not felt like chumming up to people. I wish I knew where there was a piano," he added. "Then you could hear me play."

"Well, we might walk up Charing Cross Road. Yes, that's not a bad idea! I want to call on some of the music publishers, too. Then we could ask the professional managers what new numbers they've got coming out and you could play them through. Yes, that's not a bad idea at all, Herb. Let's do that."

"Jazz music?"

"Well, I could see how you could sight-read then, Herb. And if it comes to that, I know Art Freiburg quite well. I'm not saying that he would, mind you, but he might lend

you one of his audition-rooms for the afternoon, if they're not too busy. Then you could practice a bit."

"Well, I'd like you to hear me play, Laddie."

"Come on, then!" and Laddie jumped down from his stool. "Come on! There's no harm in meeting Art Freiburg, anyway. What's more, I've got to call in to-day or to-morrow. I subscribe to most of the publishing firms and I get pro. copies of all their numbers. But I didn't get any this month from Freiburg. An oversight somewhere. All ready? Sure you won't have another before you go?"

"No, thanks."

"Right."

In a moment they were walking up Shaftesbury Avenue, Laddie in his grey flannel suit, hatless, and carrying a parcel of music; Herbert in his dark suit and felt hat, his raincoat over his arm. They turned to the left at the top and were shortly in Charing Cross Road, standing before the windows of the Victory Music Company.

"These are all the big hits of the moment. See that big display of *Harmony Blues*? That's the biggest hit this year."

"Really?"

"Oh—the Victory have put out some fine numbers in their time. Especially this year. Just walk along a moment. I want to see what Herstein's are featuring, next door. Oh—*The Girl in my Dream*. Nice waltz, that. And there's a good number, too—*The Dixie Parade*. Goes with a fine swing, that. Still, let's go and see what Art Freiburg's got."

They returned, then, to the next shop, through the swing door, past a counter where further copies of *Harmony Blues* were prominently displayed, and up a flight of stairs. Mr. Freiburg, they found, was engaged. Strains of pianos came to them from two glass-partitioned rooms on their left. To the right were two brown-painted doors, both of which were closed.

"Art Freiburg sits in there. Sam Holtz, who owns the business, sits in the other."

"Oh, yes?" Herbert answered, sitting carefully on a cane chair.

"That's *Jazz Lips* someone's playing in the first Audition Room."

"Really?"

"That must be Bert Bloomfield doing a bit of plugging."

"Plugging?"

"Yes, trying to make someone believe it's a good number. That's his job. He works under Art Freiburg and he has to get all the artists to put Victory numbers into their Acts. To get them popular, see? And a proper old plugger Bert is! Worries the life out of them to sing his numbers. There, that's Bert singing now. Hear him?"

*"Ain't you got no one to love you?
Ain't you got nobody who
Drives away all cares and worries,
Making the skies always blue?
Ain't you got someone to love you?
Somebody tender and true?
If you ain't, turn to your Mother,
She's been the best pal to you."*

"Like it?"

"The words sound a bit sloppy, I must say."

"Oh—no one cares about the words, Herb. No one cares about the lyric. They're all like that, anyway. What do you think of the melody?"

"Quite pretty, I suppose. Ordinary, though."

"Oh—it's nothing great, I admit. Still, it's not a bad number, in its way. They're playing *Hot Feet* in the next-door room. That needs a bit of playing. I do some hot licks on my sax in that."

"Licks?"

"Yes. Some fancy stuff."

"Oh!"

The door of one of the glass-partitioned audition-rooms opened, and two men came out, one carrying some sheet music under his arm.

"I think it'll suit you, Harry," said one of them. "But get the boys busy on the others. *Jazz Lips* is going to be a riot. Max Mander worked it at the Holborn Empire last week and he stopped the Show. Had all the gallery singing it before the second chorus."

"Thanks, Bert. I'll look through them all. See you soon."

"Right. So-long old man. Well, Laddie! What's new?"

"I got no pro. copies from you this month, Bert. What's the idea?"

"Thanks for telling me. I'll get on to it right away. You haven't moved, I suppose."

"No, same address. Here, meet Herb James."

"Glad to meet you. You in the business, too?"

"Yes," Laddie answered for him. "Piano player."

"That so? Where are you working?"

"Bristol," Laddie answered, even more quickly. "Thought while he was up he ought to come in and see you. Got anything new to show him? Straight stuff, of course. He's in a three-piece outfit, working a café there."

"Certainly. And Laddie, I want you to hear the new arrangement of *Jazz Lips*. Boy, it's going to be a riot! It's only been out a week but the sales are colossal. It looks a certain winner to me. And, of course, *Harmony Blues* is still sweeping the country. Another riot!"

"Well, let's hear something new. But let Mr. James, here, have a look through your stuff, first. Straight stuff. Piano, cello and fiddle. You know the idea. Put him in a room to himself. I want a chat with you, anyway, if you've the time."

"Sure, Laddie. Just a minute."

"Was it necessary to put in that Bristol story?" Herbert whispered as soon as Mr. Bloomfield had crossed the room

and was busy collecting pieces of music from shelves at the further end of the room.

"Leave it to me, Boy! I know my stuff! I'll leave you alone in there for a bit, keeping Bert in conversation. If you're doing all right, we'll both come in. If you're not doing so hot, I'll come in alone. That'll be the signal. If you feel yourself that it's not a go, come out and join us."

"Right, Laddie. You're certainly kind."

"Forget it, kid. Let's go in there now, and then, when Bert comes, I'll take him outside myself, to make sure."

They walked into the audition-room, and Herbert placed his raincoat on the chair by the upright piano and removed his felt hat.

"Still got a good crop of hair, I see."

"Can't keep it down, Laddie," and Herbert tried to smooth down his wiry black hair with his hands. He opened the piano and found in doing so that his hands were dusty, and he rubbed them with his pocket handkerchief.

"Don't expect the Ritz Hotel in these places. They don't spend much money up here. This is only for the pro's, Herb. The pile carpet goes in the showroom downstairs, first. When it's worn out, it's cut into pieces and put down in the rooms here. Still, they might keep these places cleaner, I must say. But they give you an ash-tray. That's to keep the cigarette ends from burning the piano, not that they've been very successful, I notice. And the windows could do with a clean, too. Still," he added, "only the musicians come up here."

Herbert was sitting looking at the keyboard.

"But what happens if I play all right?" he asked.

"Ah, that's where young Laddie comes in. Influence!" and Laddie patted his chest, theatrically. "I know the very man to send you to. Thought of it as we walked along. Izzy Goldberg. He runs an Agency in Dean Street. I happen to know his brother, Jack. He's in the business, too. Plays

sax with 'The Six Manhattan's' at the Hamburg. Did him a good turn once. He handles straight musicians, too. We'll go and see him."

"Are there many jobs about?"

"Couldn't say. But Izzy will know. There're cinemas, too. A lot of work to be had playing in cinemas. That's longer hours but the pay isn't so bad. We'll see what Izzy says."

"Laddie, I'd give a great deal to land something. For five weeks I've been lying to Maisie. She keeps asking after the people in the factory. How this, or that fellow is. And I keep making up things to tell her," and Herbert still sat looking at the ivory keys of the upright piano.

"Well, we all have to lie now and again."

"I've never lied to Maisie before."

"Well, it's in a good cause, Herb."

"I suppose so. Still, I'd give a great deal to land something."

"How long can you last out?"

Herbert shook his head thoughtfully.

"It's difficult, you see. I'm out all day. Well, I try not to spend much. A sandwich and a cup of coffee does me. Then there are fares, although I walk mostly. It all mounts up at the end of the week. And I still give Maisie the same every Friday night, same as I did before."

"Yes, it makes it difficult, Herb. Very worrying, too."

"And, of course, Maisie likes things nice, you know. She's been brought up to it. Not that she's extravagant. We never could afford to be that, anyway. But she likes things nice. I can't say anything to her. But the money just dribbles away."

"Of course." And then, after a pause: "I could always lend you a quid or two, Herb."

Herbert shook his head again.

"No, thanks, Laddie. But I appreciate it."

"Have a look through some of these, Mr. James,"

Herbert heard a voice saying. "I don't know exactly what you're after. I expect you know our standard catalogue pretty well?"

"Bound to!" Laddie remarked. "Everyone knows the Victory catalogues, Bert. No, new stuff's what my friend's after. What have you got here? Yes, that's the kind of stuff. Have a look through these, Herb. Bert and I are going outside."

Herbert noticed Laddie giving him a most obvious wink as he left the room. Then the door closed.

Herbert sat. What, he thought, were the signals? If his playing was no good was Laddie coming in alone, or was he bringing Mr. Bloomfield in with him? He wished, then, that he had listened more attentively to Laddie's instructions, but his mind had been on other things, for he found it difficult to concentrate these days. Always his mind was wandering. He had noticed this coming on for some time now; and he had set himself things to remember to conquer this failing. The name of this shop on his left, and its number in the street. Which book stood first in that bookshop in St. Martin's Lane. The times of the trains to and from Brighton, which he had seen advertised on a poster at Victoria Station. Then the trains to Eastbourne and Bexhill. The names of all the people on the Roll of Honour outside the Church at the top of Linden Terrace. He had found great difficulty in remembering these things but he had persevered. He could remember the trains to Brighton, Eastbourne and Bexhill, but he could never repeat the Roll of Honour from memory right through. This had worried him. And now he had forgotten Laddie's arrangement over the signals.

He sat studying the keys. Laddie! What a good friend! He remembered his youth in Merthyr Tydfil. He had always liked Laddie Williams, although Laddie was many years his junior. And Laddie had always said that he could never work in the pits. His father had been killed in an explosion

when Laddie was a boy. Shortly afterwards, another pit disaster had killed his Uncle Owen. Both of these deaths had left a profound impression upon Laddie, and the mines would never see *him*, he had said. He had worked in a fish shop after leaving school, and being an orphan, with no ties in the town, he had left Merthyr Tydfil for London, with his meagre savings, a few years later. Now he was earning as much as twelve pounds a week, playing his saxophone! It was wonderful to have made such strides in the world, unaided. Herbert had thought that he was doing well with his four pounds ten a week. But he had not that coming in any more. . . . The pieces of music in his hand seemed suddenly to contain the key to golden opportunities—playing in cinemas—tea shops—cafés. There would be glamour there, too, he thought. He pictured himself on the raised platform in some beautiful café, with glittering lights and the smell of warm food. He was wearing a smart black suit, with winged collar, stiff white cuffs protruding from his coat sleeves, sitting at the piano, a violinist and cellist to his right. They had finished playing. Applause! Yes, he remembered the applause that he had received at the conclusion of the solo in *Stabat Mater* at the Festival, in his youth. Applause did something to a man, putting self-confidence back into his heart, after the nervous strain of the moments before starting.

It was curious, he thought, how soon you could lose self-confidence when you were out of a job. He was aware that his manner lately had stood in his way. He might have landed that job with the pickle factory if only he had had more self-confidence. He had been aware, at his interview, that the foreman regarded him as a fool, and had almost said so. But he could not help himself, then. Besides he had walked a long way to get to that interview, and it had been a tiring day, close and muggy. But, even so, he might have given a better account of himself. He need not have stood

there, dumb and nervous, as he had done, fingering his grey felt hat before the penetrating foreman's eyes. And now, he was sitting with copies of music in his moist hands, his mind confused. Confidence! If only he had confidence!

He opened the first piece of music and placed it on the rack. F sharp, a key he never liked. *Temptations*, by Oscar Jute. He scanned the music, sitting forward on his stool, as his fingers felt nervously for the first chord before striking it. The shock of that first chord, as it resounded tinnily through the audition room, was like the clanging of some deep bell. His fingers left the keys suddenly, as if he had felt the hideous coldness of some corpse. Sweat gathered in beads on his forehead. For a moment the room seemed to revolve, as his hand wiped away the gathering sweat. Confidence! If only he had confidence! He felt tired, so tired; his legs seemed numbed; his feet on the pedals seemed not to belong to him. If only he had not had those two glasses of beer! On an empty stomach, too. Of course, he was not eating regularly, but that should not make this difference to a man of his age. Thirty-eight. What was that? Of course, he had had a little trouble with his lungs some years ago, which had made him leave the mines and had prevented him from joining the army, as his friends had done. No, it was just the humiliation of being unemployed, the anxieties for Maisie, the fear of Joseph Hake. Those were the things that were getting him down, he thought. But he could not go on like this. He must pull himself together. He could not return to Linden Terrace until half-past six, and it was now only twelve o'clock. Laddie was outside talking to Mr. Bloomfield, one ear on the sounds that were to emanate from the audition-room, and save for that one chord, nothing had come!

Again he scanned Mr. Oscar Jute's new composition on the rack before him. If only he had a cigarette! He had smoked his last in the saloon bar. *Temptations*. Why had Mr.

Jute written it in F sharp? What was the next song—sorry, next number? Or was that only for jazz? *Nocturne in E Flat Minor*. That looked even more difficult. No, he had better try *Temptations* first. Again the first chord sounded and the first two bars were faithfully reproduced on the tinny piano. It continued smoothly. Now he was turning the page. How he hated the key of F sharp! His damp and nerveless fingers struck the notes automatically. It was amazing how they found their correct resting-places, he thought. Here came a difficult run. He had better go carefully here. *Discord!* The sweat seemed to ooze from his forehead now. *Discord!!* He tried it again. That was better. It went more easily now. Already at the bottom of the next page. Turn over. Yes, it was going more smoothly now. Was Laddie listening to this bit? Quite melodious, was Mr. Jute. He had better turn back and play that all over again. He would know it better next time. There would be time to practise it if he found a job, too. He supposed that those smart café orchestras rehearsed sometimes? It would not always mean playing from sight. Turn back. The first chord again. It did not sound so frightening this time. Now for the difficult few bars again. He must have no discords this time. Take it easy. Yes, got through that all right. Now over the page. Finish with a flourish. Chords up the piano. Yes, Mr. Jute had written quite a nice little composition. Now for the finish. Carefully now! And the last chord echoed finally through the dusty audition-room.

There was a mumbled conversation outside. Was Laddie coming in alone, or was he bringing Mr. Bloomfield with him? What did either signal mean, anyway? Was no one coming? He could not just sit. He had better play something else. *Nocturne in E Flat Minor*. No, he had better play *Temptations* again to give him confidence. Easy now! Don't let it run away with you just because you know it better! Yes, over the page. Through that difficult passage. Quite a

melodious composition. He was sitting on the raised platform now. The waitresses were moving to and fro and the electric lights were twinkling above. There were thick carpets on the floors and palms grew from large bowls in the corners of the room. There was a clatter of tea-cups and a soft murmur of conversation, and a beautiful smell of buttered scones and hot tea. . . .

"What's wrong, Herb?" a voice asked, lifting his head from the piano. "Hurt yourself?"

"No."

"Wondered what had happened, hearing no music."

"I don't know. I think I fell asleep. I don't know."

"Fetch a glass of water, Bert."

A sound of someone leaving the room.

"You're in a bad way, going off like that."

"I'm all right. I fell asleep, I think," and Herbert was aware of dizziness, a feeling of nausea. "It's close in here," he said, rubbing his tousled black hair with a puzzled expression. "Let's get outside."

"Just you drink a glass of water, first. Did you hurt your head when you fell on the keyboard?"

"I don't know. Yes, I can feel it. Is there a mark?"

"Yes, there is a mark. Thank you, Bert. Here drink this. You'll be all right in no time. Ah—Mr. Freiburg! How's things? No, nothing wrong. My friend's been taken queer for a moment. Right as rain now. Like you to meet him, Herbie James. Piano player."

Herbert remembered seeing a large frame move over towards his stool, wearing a grey suit. A bald head, pink and shining. A gold tooth on the left side of his jaw.

"Glad to know you, Mr. James," a deep American voice said, so deep that it sounded like some wind instrument in the Queen's Hall Orchestra, the Promenade Concerts of which were Herbert's especial delight. "Not feeling so good, eh? That's too bad. Sit around here as long as you like."

Sure! Make yourself at home. No trouble at all. Did you get Harry sold on those new numbers, Bert? I want him to feature them in his Act. He's at the Palladium the week after next."

"Yes, Mr. Freiburg. But I'll keep at him all the same and see he *does* put them in."

"Good boy. And I want you to run down to the Chelsea Palace to-night and catch Marcelle La Rue. She left *Jazz Lips* out of her act second house last night. What's the idea, anyway? Don't the cow know a good number when she hears one?"

"I'll see her to-night, Mr. Freiburg."

"And talk to that lousy pit orchestra while you're there. The stuff they're playing in the *Intermission* this week is just terrible. Get them on to something from the catalogue. These guys give me a pain playing those lousy Herstein numbers. I suppose the leader's paid for doin' it," and Herbert was aware of cigar smoke wafting slowly across the room towards him. "Heard Roy Dunfee's new number, Laddie? It ain't printed yet. Bert can play it through to you from the manuscript, though. Should be a sensation. That boy certainly writes a melody. I've signed him up for two years. Yes sir! I've signed him on the dotted line for two years! Fine stroke of business, I'll say."

"I'd like to hear it, Mr. Freiburg. I'll come back later. Think I'd better take Herbie along. He doesn't look so good."

"Sure, you take the boy along. Drop in any time. Always glad to see you, kid. Sure your friend wouldn't like a drink? Got some pre-war Scotch in the cupboard in my office."

"No thanks, Mr. Freiburg. Not much of a drinker, is Herb. Still, nice of you, all the same. Come on, Herb."

Herbert picked up his raincoat and placed his felt hat on his head. With apologies and thanks to Mr. Freiburg and to Mr. Bloomfield, he walked slowly down the stairs, across the pile-carpeted floor of the showroom, into Charing Cross

Road, Laddie holding tightly to his arm. They turned right outside, and came presently to the White Horse. Herbert had hoped that Laddie would have mentioned his playing, but they walked to the White Horse in silence. A feeling of bitter despair had now descended upon him. What was the good of anything? Why had Laddie buoyed up his hopes like that? As if he were good enough to play in a café orchestra! The whole idea was fantastic. He was just a failure. Laddie's silence was humiliating, too. Why hadn't he mentioned his playing, one way or the other? Why hadn't he put him out of his agony? They were walking up the street now, Laddie's strong hand holding Herbert's arm. He was glad of that support. He felt utterly humiliated. Ever since he had lost his job he had been humiliated, but this seemed the most crushing blow of all. Laddie's strong grasp helped him then, as his feet dragged listlessly behind him, his eyes aimlessly searching the pavement, feeling desperately afraid. A new and hidden fear had come to him. The hooting of the motors in the street passed through his head like knives thrown at him from all sides. Yes, he thought, this is the end. I'm finished now! Can't face any more of this. It has been too long. Disappointments. Yes, even disillusionments. No, perhaps not all disillusion, for there was Laddie. He, alone, had offered a helping hand. *But why hadn't he mentioned his playing?* Didn't he know that Laddie's judgment was the difference, at that moment, between hope and despair? To say nothing was the most cruel blow of all, crushing, humiliating, filling him with further fears. He knew that he had only played that one piece, in F sharp, but he had only blundered once. Yet those two discords! How they had crashed through his brain, just as the indiscriminate hooting of the motors was slowly driving reason from his mind, so that he had to close his eyes as if to drive away the madness of it all. And he trudged on, Laddie grasping his arm and guiding him through the traffic. "Steady, Herb. Take it easy."

wasn't it? And then, to-morrow you'll come back to my room, after a good night's rest at home, and you'll call for me. If you're late, you'll find me in Archer Street. Then I'm taking you to some rehearsal-rooms I know of—— No, don't you worry about that. I'll advance the money. It won't cost so much, either. And I'll go back to Bert this afternoon and get him to let me have some music for you to play over. Then you'll be able to practise—see? And if you take my advice, you'll tell the missis that you're going to be kept late to-morrow night, so that you can take your time and practise as long as you like. By then, I'll have fixed an appointment with Izzy Goldberg, and we'll see what can be done.”

“I play all right—you think I'll do?”

“Steady, Herb. Take it easy, boy. You'll do all right for that sort of stuff. Don't get excited now. I'm not saying that you're a Paderewski, mind, but you should be adequate for what's wanted in a job like we have in mind. And I'll tell Izzy he must get you fixed somewhere. Another large Guinness, please, Miss. Yes, only one. For my friend here. Yes, and bring the bill, too. Tell the chef he cooked my steak a treat and hand him this from me at the same time. Thank you, Miss. So now you know, Herbie, what the routine is. That's another word you've got to remember. The order we fix our numbers to be played in is the *routine*—see? And I'll get my landlady to bring you a nice cup of tea, while I'm out getting some *dots* from Bert Bloomfield. And don't you concern yourself about anything. Imagine I'm your business-manager—see? You're my protégé, if you like. And I'll take you round to meet some of the boys when you're feeling more yourself. All you've got to do meantime is to take it easy. That's all. That tall fellow that just left us was Jimmy Briscoe. He works for a few of the bands. Sort of business manager. Works on commission and does pretty well. He was the man who brought 'The Five Spotlights' over from

the States, those coloured boys who played at Charlie's Club. A sensation, they were. You have to keep in with all the fellows, Herb. You never know when they'll come in useful. Like Izzy Goldberg. Drink it down, boy, and we'll get along."

The sleep that came to him in Laddie's bed-sitting room in Bloomsbury Street half an hour later was as if a storm-tossed ship had reached harbour after a tempestuous sea. Laddie had drawn the linen blind and that action had seemed to shut away the world. Save for the occasional clatter of a passing horse and cart, or the dull sound of passing motors, all had been silence. He had fallen at once into a heavy sleep, helped largely by the two glasses of beer in Shaftesbury Avenue and the two glasses of Guinness at lunch.

He was aware suddenly that someone was shaking him. He awoke in a cold sweat to find a woman standing over his bed. He jumped quickly to an upright position.

"Who are you?"

"Only a cup of tea, dear. Mr. Williams told me to make sure you were called at half-past five."

"Oh."

"Shall I draw the blind?"

"No—please no!"

"Then I'll just switch on the light."

Herbert was aware of a large figure in black walking to the door, and of the room suddenly becoming illuminated. A wash-stand in the corner. A wardrobe facing him. A black trunk in the other corner. A gas fire. A small table to his right. A black case leaning against the table—obviously the saxophone. Twelve guineas a week!

"Now, just you drink your tea, dear. I've cut you some bread and butter."

"Thank you."

"Mr. Williams should be back any moment."

"Thank you."

The door closed. He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. Five-and-twenty to six. In an hour's time he would be walking down Linden Terrace. Maisie would be waiting for him in the front room upstairs. No doubt Mr. Tibbit would try to engage him in conversation on his way up, which would be very awkward as his rent was due to-day.

"What sort of a day have you had, dear?" Maisie would ask.

"Oh, pretty much the same."

They would embrace. Maisie would take his hat and raincoat and put them away in the cupboard. Then she would continue with the cooking of their evening meal, as he read the evening paper in the bay window.

"How's Mr. Naughton?" she would call. "Is his wife any better?"

"Yes, she's getting along fine, dear."

"She's made a wonderful recovery, I must say."

"Yes."

And until supper was cooked they would carry on a conversation between the front and middle rooms, while Herbert finished his paper. Then they would eat and Herbert would help her wash up the dishes and lay the breakfast for the morning, before talking of domestic and local affairs until it was time to go to bed. If she had been over to Romford during the day, there would be news of the Hake family. Yes, in an hour's time he would be living through that again. What could he say of to-day?

He had eaten his bread and butter and had poured out his tea, on the tray on his lap, sitting up in Laddie's bed. He was in his pants and vest. His clothes lay in disorder about the room, as he had slipped them off three hours earlier. What would he say of to-day? Of to-morrow? Of the next day? A sense of complete helplessness swept over him again. What was the good? He just hadn't the capacity. It was not

in him. And his rent was due to-day. He had not that, either. He had assured Maisie that he was putting it by each week, but it had gone, instead, in food for both of them and Maisie's pocket money. His own small needs, too. His life-long savings had gone in buying the furniture for their home, three months previously. His head was still aching, and he felt confused by the drink that he had had during the morning. And in less than an hour he would be seeing Maisie, supposedly, after a long day's work in the factory. He would be acting again, lying, pretending, deceitful. How hideous life can be when you're up against it, he thought. Being out of a job, robbed you of self-respect. It filled you with suspicions. It made you resentful. It destroyed utterly the joy of living, even the joy of returning to Maisie each evening, which he had looked forward to so keenly in happier days. It made you shy, awkward, ashamed. It turned you into a liar—a cheat. It destroyed illusions. God! How it had changed him! No longer could he look at things with his old philosophy, for that had gone, too. He was embittered, now. He resented seeing people eating, through the opened windows of the gay restaurants, as he passed. He resented seeing people ride by in their fine motor-cars. He resented reading of the people who were to be seen at the smart supper places each night, throwing their money away in their search for happiness. He resented seeing other people happy at all. He resented even the innate cheerfulness of his landlord, Walter Tibbit.

This is what being out of a job had done for him, he thought. That, and giving him a wholesome contempt for his own miserable self, devoid now of courage and hope. Playing in an orchestra in a café! As if he could! No, the best thing for him was the river. . . . He had often read of people drowning themselves in the river and had wondered why they had done it. He knew now. It was because they had no hope left in life—or in their own selves. And as he

contemplated drowning, he felt a strange elation. There would be peace, after the water had submerged him and had filled his lungs so that breathing had ceased. There would be no trudging the streets then. No more heart-breaking interviews. No more Joseph Hake. Just peace. Absolute peace. Of course, it would be hard leaving Maisie, but then, what good was he to her, if you considered it logically? She had married beneath her. There was no argument about that. He had been a miner, once, but he had not disclosed that fact to Joseph Hake. He could not support her, as Joseph Hake had rightly pointed out from the first. Yes, what good was he to Maisie now? Just a lying, deceitful, unemployed wastrel. She was young still, only twenty-five. She could marry again. She would soon forget, once she knew the whole truth. And those fiendish noises would cease in his head. . . . He ran his fingers through his stubborn black hair and leant back against the pillow. Yes, the noises in his head would cease then, too. The river should not be cold; it was only September. But how did you get into the river? Did you jump off the bridge? And how would you stop yourself from swimming? A natural sense of self-preservation must surely come to you? No. It would mean allowing yourself to sink, slowly drinking in the muddy waters of the Thames. . . . No more lying then, no more trudging the streets, no more of Joseph Hake's sarcasm, no more heart-breaking interviews. . . . Of course, some used gas. There was a gas fire in the room, wasn't there? Yes. To his right. . . . He stared at it, fascinated. A small black gas fire. Some of the asbestos pillars had broken. The piece on the extreme right was in halves, the top piece leaning disconsolately to one side, like a sagging tulip. Just shut the window and put his trousers tightly against the bottom of the door and turn on the gas. . . . But he could not leave Maisie behind to face those bills, alone. No. She must come, too. . . . He only had to turn on the gas in their bedroom,

after Maisie had fallen asleep. . . . She would feel no pain. Her cotton nightdress would rise and fall rhythmically for a while . . . then rise no more . . . her hand still under her chin, as she always slept. It did not take much, really, to stop your blood from pulsing through your veins, and the noises from battering against the inside of your skull, like the crashing of the cymbals and the beating of the sticks on a bass drum.

"Day dreaming again, Herb?"

"Oh—it's you!"

"Come on, my lad," he heard Laddie say, breathlessly. "Time to get up. Here's some *dots* for to-morrow. I've fixed an appointment for you with Izzy Goldberg for eleven to-morrow. 52A, Dean Street, second floor. Here it is. I've written it all out. Don't lie there looking at the ceiling, Herb. You've got to get a move on, or you won't be back with your missis by six-thirty."

"Yes," Herbert replied, taking the music from Laddie's outstretched hand.

"I'm playing at the far end of Wimbledon Common to-night. Lucky it isn't raining. That's the best of playing a saxophone, Herb. It isn't much to carry. The poor old drummer has to take a taxi everywhere, rain or fine."

"Yes."

"I see Mrs. Corrigan gave you your tea all right. Enjoy it?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Feeling better?"

"Yes."

"You're looking a bit strange, Herb," Laddie said, staring at him earnestly. "Sure you're feeling all right?"

"I'm all right."

"Well, you'd better get dressed, you know."

"Yes."

Herbert handed the tea-tray to Laddie and got down from

the iron bedstead, and picked up his trousers from the floor. No, he could not put them against the door now. He stood in front of the gas fire as he dressed. A small inoffensive piece of cast iron. Ridiculously small to be able to stop those noises in the head, to save wearing those holes in his socks and the heels from his shoes. He had never thought much about gas fires before. The one in front of him fascinated him. A small tap was on the side. . . .

"Yes, Herbie, I often look back to the old days. It's marvellous, really, isn't it? Here am I playing saxophone at Lady Tweedie's to-night. Royalty may be there, too, they say. Joe Dean, who's got the job, is putting on his tail coat, anyway. Told the boys to smarten up all they can, too. He's made a special arrangement of *God Save the King*—in case. Old Joe likes to do things well, you know. A proper old showman, is Joe."

"Yes."

"Wait till I get my toes into this game! I'll show them! I'm going to be a showman, too."

"What's your ambition, Laddie?"

"A nice permanent job, with my own band, in one of the smart hotels. That's my idea. Do things in style. It'll be the rage of London, Laddie Williams' Band, one day, Herb. You see!"

"I hope so. You deserve it. You're kind. There ain't many who're kind to-day."

"Oh—go on!"

"Not when you're down."

"Well, wasn't I down, too? Didn't I have to start in this game? Oh, you've got the creeps on you to-day, boy. You're just over-tired. You've left your waistcoat off."

"Oh, thanks," and Herbert took off his coat and put on his waistcoat, finally putting back his frayed and shiny jacket.

"Remember, Herb, about the silver lining. It'll be a beautiful day to-morrow, too. You see. And once you get

your teeth into your practising, you'll feel a different man. It's doing nothing that gets a fellow down. And you come and pick me up in Archer Street before one o'clock, after you've seen Izzy. Got your raincoat? There's your hat. Take my advice, you'll get in the Tube. It's quicker. Now you toddle back home and have a good sleep. Don't lose Izzy's address. It's on the piece of paper I gave you. So long. Here! Remember, you're going to be my protégé—see?" and Herbert felt the strong grasp of his friend's hand, as he looked into two laughing eyes. "And remember, there's always a silver lining. You see."

"Yes."

"And here's a few shillings to go on with."

"But——"

"Now perhaps you won't mind leaving me," Laddie laughed, "so that I can get myself poshed up. I've got some stains on my dress suit. Someone upset some coffee over me at the last *Gig* I played. Mrs. Corrigan's lending me some ammonia. So-long, Herbie!" And Herbert found himself at the front door, clutching some silver coins tightly in his hot hand.

"Remember, you're my protégé—see?" he heard Laddie call after him, smilingly, his hand raised in salute.

Then the front door closed.

Herbert walked on. He was alone again, now. He had to cross the road presently. Could he do it—alone? He stood on the kerb, watching the passing vehicles. Then he ran across, clutching the silver coins in his hand, and came presently to the British Museum Station, and walked slowly in, taking his place in the queue.

"Clapham Common."

"Hurry up!" a voice behind him shouted.

Of course, he must pay. He opened his left hand. Eight shillings. Very good of Laddie. Yes, Laddie was kind. He put down two shillings, collected his change through the

grille, and passed down the lift to the platform. "Clapham Common—change at Oxford Circus." Yes, Laddie was different from the rest. Even the people in the lift seemed to jostle him unnecessarily, seeming to take a fiendish delight in making life even more unbearable. Everyone did. He seemed an outcast. No one, except Laddie, was kind to him, now.

"Pass along the platform, there!" a voice boomed peremptorily in his ear.

Everyone shouted at him. Just as if he were scum—beneath contempt. Yes, but that's just what he was—scum, flotsam. He had no place in the world, now. He had seen them in the streets at night. Sleeping out. Just the flotsam, the scum, the unwanted. How he had pitied them in the old days! Now, he was one of them. The nomads who roamed the streets and scavenged the dustbins, in ragged clothes. The people whose eyes seemed to stare from their sockets, till you thought they must drop out. The people whose battered feet shifted along the pavements, their eyes on the gutter, searching for stray cigarette ends. The people who opened carriage doors, in the hope of some small coin. . . . Yes, that was the fate of Herbert James, late of the rigging shop of the Thames Aviation Company. He could see it, now.

A train roared through the tunnel. Its noise drove Herbert back against the tiled wall of the station, as if a shell had burst suddenly amongst them. God! he thought, as he stood shivering against the wall, will this never cease? People pushed and fought their way into the train. A moment later, he found himself in a carriage, hanging fiercely to a strap. The train gathered speed . . . *Tom-tom-de-tom-tom-de-tom-tom-de-tom-tom*. . . . Twenty quid a week, regular. . . . You're going to be my protégé—see? . . . *Tom-tom-de-tom-tom-de-tom-tom*. . . . Now the wheels were doing it, too. . . .

Herbert, with staring eyes, walked down Linden Terrace, half an hour later, his raincoat still over his arm. He turned

in, wearily, at the gate, and opened the front door of Number Five. He heard the Tibbits speaking together in the front room, as he stood on the doormat. No, he could not talk to them, now. Besides, there was the rent which was due to-day. . . . He walked noiselessly past their half-opened door and hurried up the stairs. There were noises of furniture being moved on the floor above. The new people had evidently moved in, but he felt quite disinterested about them. He opened the kitchen door, to find the remains of yesterday's neck of lamb lying under a gauze meat cover on the table, and flies buzzing hungrily around its outside. A note was pinned to the mantelpiece. Maisie had gone over to Romford, it said. She was sorry to be away from him; it was the first occasion that they had been parted for a night since their marriage. But her mother had had another attack and had sent over. She would be home to-morrow. . . . There were some crosses at the bottom of the letter. . . . Some instructions, too, about heating up the potatoes in the oven.

Maisie was sane and healthy, like Laddie. Noises did not buzz inside *their* heads, like the beating of the big drum and the crashes of the cymbal. . . . He wished that Maisie had been home. Fear seized him again, standing alone in the sudden quietness of the kitchen, as his eyes left the hastily scribbled note and moved slowly towards the gas stove. . . . He leant down and opened the stove door. . . . The potatoes were lying in a tin, waiting to be heated up. . . . He turned a tap and listened to the hissing of the gas through the pipe. . . . No, it did not smell poisonous, as he leant forward. . . . How easy! . . . But he must wait for Maisie. He could not leave her to face those bills; alone. He saw that, now. He rose to his feet. The room seemed suddenly chilly. He shuddered. . . . The people above were moving their furniture again. . . . The room was smelling of gas. . . . He had better turn it off. He leant down again and turned off the tap, before walking thoughtfully into their bedroom.

Maisie's green silk dress was lying, carefully folded, on the white coverlet of their double bed. . . . Of course, she would be wearing her new serge costume to-day. Maisie always wore her new things right away. . . . He hung it carefully in the cupboard. Three and a half guineas. . . . As he closed the cupboard door, he noticed the small gas fire to his left. . . . Gas seemed on every side, now. . . . He stood looking down at it, fascinated. . . . As his hands touched the mantelpiece above, he found that he was still clutching Laddie's silver coins in his hot hand. . . .

He closed the bedroom door, walked into the front room and stood by the window, looking out into the street. The sun was setting over the church at the corner of Linden Terrace. His hands were in his pockets, nervously jingling Laddie's silver coins and the remains of his own money. No, he could not stay alone in these rooms now. He was afraid. He knew that. He was desperately afraid. His face twitched agitatedly. Should he go downstairs and ask the Tibbits if he could sit with them? They would be glad of his company, he knew. Yet he could not very well do that, since he and Maisie had been so unfriendly since moving in. And the rent due, too. But he could not stay here alone; that was certain. He could not trust himself. Those gas taps. . . . No, he had better go to the pictures. He could find distraction there. He could sit in the cheap seats, using part of Laddie's money. . . . Then, when he came home, he would heat up the potatoes, before going to bed.

He walked impatiently into the bathroom, ran some cold water into the basin, took off his coat and waistcoat, and washed thoroughly, splashing the cold water on to his bruised forehead for a long time, before re-dressing and creeping stealthily from the house, unnoticed by his landlord.

The morning dawned. Herbert watched it, nervously, from his bed, through the crack in the Venetian blind. He

rose, presently, and stood before the window. Rain was falling heavily. Laburnum Terrace at the back looked grey, low-lying clouds seeming to cap the roof-tops. The small piece of lawn in the Tibbits' garden was covered with large puddles. Herbert shuddered. "To-morrow will be beautiful," Laddie had said. . . . He walked over to the marble-topped washstand and poured himself out a glass of water. Then another. He was still shaking, just as he had been yesterday, when he returned home. The drink that he had taken with Laddie, too, had made him thirsty.

There would be no necessity to act this morning, he decided, as he stood by the bed contemplating his day. Maisie would not know what time he had left the house. And he could not walk aimlessly about the streets until eleven o'clock to-day, before keeping this important appointment with Mr. Goldberg, and arrive there in soaking clothes. There would be plenty of time this morning. There would also be time to press his suit.

He walked meditatively into the kitchen. The remains of his supper lay in disorder on the table, but he had forgotten to replace the gauze cover over the meat, he noticed. He cleared away the debris, and heated an iron, placing his trousers carefully on the table. He reflected upon the story that he had seen unfolded on the screen the night before, as he had sat in his cheap seat near the front. It had been closely akin to his own. The hero, in that picture, had had small beginnings, too. A friend had come to his aid, just as Laddie had, and the hero had won through insuperable difficulties, winning in addition the love of one of the most beautiful women that Herbert had ever seen, in spite of parental hostility. . . . The girl's father had reminded him of Joseph Hake, with his dictatorial manner and his early contempt for his son-in-law, which had grown, as the story unfolded, into a deep respect. Herbert might be able to do that, too. He would go to see Mr. Goldberg at eleven, anyway. Visions

came to him again—a new black coat and a winged collar, starched cuffs showing from his sleeves, two musicians to his right, the fiddle and 'cellist. The smell of warm food, the glittering lights, the palms in their brass stands. . . . Applause!

Herbert paused, the hot iron in his hand. The postman had just knocked. He listened. Now someone was walking downstairs. A man's step. Perhaps it was the man who had looked over the banisters as he had walked up the stairs the night before. More inquisitive people in the house! Everybody inquiring into his affairs! . . . Now the man was below, talking to the Tibbits' daughter. . . . Herbert continued slowly with the pressing of his trousers. The man was walking upstairs again. A steady tread. Herbert paused again. Two people were now walking on the floor above. Well, he'd be knowing all about them soon enough, he supposed. He paused again with his pressing. Goldberg? Could he play well enough? Well, he would try, playing Mr. Jute's new composition. There was always a way out now, if he failed. . . . And he continued to press his trousers, as the rain was driven in torrents against his kitchen window.

Three hours later, he was walking up Linden Terrace, his raincoat billowing behind him, Izzy's address carefully folded in his inside pocket, Laddie's music under his arm. Mrs. Potter, who was returning with her shopping bag, passed him on the corner.

"Funny manners, I must say!" she muttered, as she turned to see him hurrying across the Common, in the direction of the Underground Station. "I'm sure he saw me."

VI

THE AUTUMN DRAGGED BY into winter. The leaves fell from the trees, only to be swept into heaps and carried away. The winds blew over the Common, blowing the hats from the heads of those who ventured forth without holding to them tightly. The nights grew longer; the dawn came later. For many mornings Martin had felt the pressure of Joyce's fingers on his shoulder, and had heard the oft-repeated phrase, "It's gone half-past six, Martin," and had jumped from his bed into utter darkness, save for the reflection of the light from his mother's bedroom along the passage outside. He would then walk over to the window and draw the blind aside. Since there had been no light in the Potters' window next door, he had gathered that they were still sleeping. He had seen, by looking to the left, the swaying outline of the cherry tree in the Potters' back garden, its naked branches whipped unmercifully by the East winds, sighing and souging as they swayed mournfully to and fro. He had noticed, by looking still farther to the left, the dawn rising angrily over the roof-tops of Laburnum Terrace, at the back. Then, with a shudder he had allowed the blind to flap back into its normal position, before switching on the light in his bedroom and putting a match to the gas fire.

One morning, late in November, he found Joyce already busy at the gas stove in the front room, as he passed through to the partitioned-off bathroom, her woollen nightdress covered by her faded dressing-gown.

"You'd better make sure your shirt is properly aired before you put it on, Martin," she said, looking at the shirt

that she had washed for him the night before, hanging on a line over the stove. "Anyhow, I'll iron it as soon as I've seen to Mother."

"Thanks, Joyce."

"Are you wearing the soft collar, or a stiff one?"

"Let me see? You like me best in a stiff one, don't you?"

"Well—no. Not altogether. No, I think I like you in the soft collar that matches the shirt."

"All right. I'll wear that."

"I'll iron it in a few minutes."

"Thank you, Joyce."

Closing the bathroom door, he attended, more carefully than usual, to his toilet. It was a pity that he had not another shirt like that blue striped one. But still, Joyce was really wonderful the way she would wash it overnight and have it ready for him on the mornings when he especially wished to wear it. And his new suit had turned out awfully well. He had put it on before the admiring gaze of his mother and sister after he had carried it home last night, and he was glad that he had taken the tailor's advice; stripes made one look taller, and were very fashionable, too. And the material that he had chosen would not shine. The tailor had guaranteed that.

By the time that he had finished his toilet, Joyce was busy at the ironing board. A few minutes later, Martin walked into his own room, carrying his shirt over his arm. Yes, and he would put on some of that new brilliantine, too, that he had bought at the chemist's near his office. After knocking at his mother's door to know if he could look at himself in the long mirror of the mahogany wardrobe, he listened to most flattering remarks from his family. He then went into the front room and had his breakfast. Ten minutes later he put on his thick new overcoat, and the new bowler hat that he had bought two days previously, in readiness for the occasion, and was walking up Linden Terrace. He had hoped

that Walter Tibbit might have been downstairs as he left the house. He expected that Walter would have been highly delighted with the effect. Besides, he had not worn a bowler hat before, and although this new one looked, and felt, a little on the small side, it certainly gave him a more prosperous appearance; and Mr. Thistlewaite, his Branch Manager, always wore a bowler hat. Although the shape of Martin's hat did not look quite the same as Mr. Thistlewaite's—Martin's seemed higher in the crown and its brim more wide—the man in the hat shop, famous for its many branches throughout the country, had assured Martin that the hat was completely "as worn." Martin had been a little dubious, but as he had never worn a bowler hat before, it must, of necessity, have looked strange when he had first seen it reflected in the mirror in the shop. But its price was very reasonable. In fact, it was remarkably cheap—cheaper, even, than his old felt hat, which he was now going to clean with benzine to remove the grease stains.

He arrived at his office earlier than usual, his limbs frozen, the frost having collected on his eye-lashes, so that he felt them cold against his cheeks as he blinked. His cheeks had more colour than usual, too, where the wind had beaten against them crossing the Common. Peter Thomas was already on the counter, examining the nib of his pen. Peter always reminded Martin of a goldfish looking at him from its bowl. He had a wealth of bright red hair, and being very short-sighted, he had to wear very thick magnifying spectacles. His mouth was large and usually open, and his ears protruded at an angle each side of his head. He and Martin had only been associated since Martin's transfer from Head Office three months previously, when he had filled the place of Ernest Bolton, who had gone to "better himself" elsewhere. But Martin had known Peter Thomas, having met him at various office functions many years before joining him on the teak counter at the Camberwell Branch.

"What-o!" Thomas said, looking up. "My word, what a swell!"

Martin, with a smile, passed, a little conscious of his bowler hat, along the counter, lifting the flap and passing through to the main office. After taking off his coat and hanging his new hat above it on the peg, he walked into the cloakroom and regarded himself again in the mirror. Then he brushed his carefully brilliantined hair once more, and noticed how more bristles seemed to be coming out of the office brush. Yes, he thought, the tailor was right. Stripes are certainly becoming. His yellow foulard tie, with handkerchief to match, had been a good idea, too, and he patted the handkerchief in his breast pocket, lifting it slightly, so that more of it showed above the breast pocket.

"You seem livelier," Peter Thomas had said over lunch a week ago. "What's the idea?"

"Oh—I don't know."

"In love?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that, Peter."

"Come on!" his friend had laughed. "Spill the beans."

"There's nothing to spill."

"Come on! It's that girl in your place at Clapham!" and Peter Thomas grinned through his magnifying spectacles. "That's what it is. What are you blushing for, then? Don't tell me there isn't something up! It's that girl down at your place. Now, isn't it?" Peter asked, leaning across the marble-topped table, his head on one side.

"Well—maybe," Martin replied, after a pause. "Not altogether, though."

And later, over their coffee:

"I'm not much of a chap with women, Peter. I never was. But there's something about that girl. It's funny," he explained, "but two months ago I had to go to the dentist. You remember? Well, you'll laugh, I expect, but as I sat

there waiting I looked through some magazines on the table. There was a *Punch* there, and there's a fellow called Shepperson, who draws in it. Well, it didn't mean much to me at first, but I began looking at it. He draws tall women. Quite roughly, really. Pen and ink. Well, I had a long wait and I kept looking at that drawing. I can't describe my feelings even now. As I say, it was only a sketch, anyway. There was some sort of a joke written underneath, I remember. But this girl was standing up—a lovely tall figure, she was. It stuck in my brain. It made me aware of women, if you know what I mean. I hadn't thought of them quite like that before. There was just something about her. The way she stood up there, with her dress clinging to her lovely tall figure, and her hair waving back from her forehead. Of course, I'm not saying that all the proportions were right in that drawing, but I became more aware, if you like, of sex, as I looked at it. Funny, but you see I haven't had much to do with women. I couldn't get that drawing out of my mind, anyway."

"Go on!" Peter said.

"Well, I bought a copy of *Punch* afterwards, and cut that picture out. I used to take it out of the drawer and look at it sometimes. The more I looked at it, too, the more I felt—well, I suddenly began looking at women quite differently. I expect all this sounds very silly to you. . . ."

"No," Peter said. "Not at all. Of course, I'm keeping company with a shop girl down near where I live. I think I told you. Well, I feel the same way about her, too. Of course, we're both past that stage, really. I mean, she came to Felixstowe with me in the summer and we're as good as married now, really. I expect I *will* marry her one of these days," Peter Thomas added. "But mother doesn't seem to care for her. She thinks she's a bit flighty. Not that she is, mind you. Of course there was another fellow first. She told me all about it. But I feel the same way about Vera, as you

do. Women's bodies are exciting things, Martin, aren't they?"

"Yes," Martin agreed. "They are."

"Then you've never slept with a woman?"

"No."

"Haven't you ever wanted to?"

"Well, no—at least, after seeing that drawing, Peter, I began looking at women . . ."

"Well, of course, if you haven't slept with a woman, Martin," Peter said, "that makes a difference. You mean to say, you never did in the war, when you were in France?"

"No."

"Surprising," Peter said. "Of course," he added, "I'm not much of a woman-izer, myself. Women don't take to me much, anyway. But Vera—she's different. Yes," he added, thoughtfully, "I expect I'll marry her one of these days."

"What's she like, Peter?"

"Well—she's no beauty, I suppose. But she's passionate. I like that in a woman. Sensible, too. Knows how to take care of herself into the bargain. Yes, I expect I'll marry her one of these days. After all, you can't sleep with a girl pretty regularly and then throw her aside. She's given up going with the other man on account of me, too. I feel quite a responsibility for her, in a way. But fancy you never having slept with a woman, Martin!"

Martin shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said, "there it is."

"But this girl in your place, what about her?"

"Well," Martin explained. "I came down the stairs the morning after we'd moved in and I saw her picking up the letters off the door mat. Then she stood up, with her back towards me. Do you know, Peter, it might have been that drawing itself! Then she turned. She had the same kind of hair. It grew back from her forehead in the same way as that drawing. Then she walked towards me, lovely, tall, slender

limbs, as well. Peter, you could have knocked me down with a feather!" he added.

"I bet."

"And she talked to me. I introduced myself, and all that. But I was so taken aback by seeing her, that I didn't make much of a show. Sort of fumbled for words, you know. Regretted it awfully afterwards, too."

"I expect you did. You always think of the right thing to say afterwards, don't you? At least, I do."

"Yes, so do I."

"Well, how did you get to know her better?"

"Through her father. He used to be in the Almond business, but went broke. He helps his wife at home, now, in the house. Well, he had some tickets given him by Mr. George, the man who owns the Reindeer, for the Police Concert, in aid of the Police Orphanage. It's my idea that Mr. George bought the tickets himself, between you and me. He likes to keep the right side of the police, being a publican. Anyhow, Mr. Tibbit had been given four tickets, and as he was taking his wife and daughter, he asked me if I'd like to be the fourth."

"I remember your telling me," Peter said, leaning interestedly across the marble-topped table.

"Well, I found myself walking home alone with her. Mrs. Tibbit has to walk a bit slow, finding difficulty with her breathing, and we found ourselves quite a way ahead and talking of everything under the sun. She's a very intellectual sort of girl, too. Talks on any subject. And before long, I was getting on like a house on fire. That was when I asked her if she'd like to go to the cinema the following night. Of course, her name isn't Carol, really," he added.

"No?"

"Her name's really Mary Ellen Tibbit."

"Then why Carol?"

"Well, you see, she was born in December. My landlord's

a jovial sort of a chap, always thinking of things. He called her 'his little Christmas Carol,' as someone was singing carols outside his house at the time she was born. He's always called her that. Now all her friends do, too."

"Really? Quite romantic-like."

"Yes. A proper jolly sort, my landlord."

"But didn't you take her out some other times, too? Didn't you take her down to one of the 'Socials' at your sister's shop?"

"Only once, Peter. I don't think she cared much for that. She's a cut above the girls in Joyce's store, you see. Yes, that's just what it is about Carol. When you meet her, you don't just meet anybody. You meet *somebody*. And my sister Joyce was very moody that night. The man who was head of her Department had been given the sack, and you know what a soft heart Joyce has. She was all moody and depressed. No, that night wasn't much of a success, Peter. But we've been to the pictures once or twice since then, and one Sunday afternoon we went to Kew Gardens and had a look round."

"Seeing much of her now?"

"Well, no. That's the trouble. She's very busy in the office lately. She's secretary, you know, to one of the partners in Severn & Browning, the exporters in Gracechurch Street. Regularly now, three times a week—Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays—she doesn't get home till about half-past nine, and that cuts into an evening. She's usually tired when she gets back, too, and goes straight to her own room downstairs. Too tired to want a game, or a talk. Often, Mr. Tibbit gets up a game of whist, either downstairs or we have it up in our place. But she doesn't feel like playing, she says. She just wants to go to her room. It's been like that now for the past month. But now and again, on a Sunday, we'll go out together somewhere. Have a walk round the Common, and a cup of tea somewhere."

"Well, I suppose it will be easier when the overtime stops?"

"I don't know. I asked her the other day how much longer it would be. She just smiled and said she didn't know. But she loves her work. That's what I like about her. Enters into everything she does. But she *has* promised to go out with me on Tuesday week. I've kept asking her, and at last she's fixed a night."

"Where are you going to take her?"

"Up West, somewhere."

"A bit expensive, those nights up West, eh?"

"Well, I've got an idea, Peter. Do you remember my telling you about a fellow I met in the war? Preston Daley? Well, I ran into him the other day. I didn't think he'd recognize me but he did. He looked just the same. Hadn't altered a bit. 'Hello, you old basket!' he said, slapping me jovially on the back, because he's a lively sort of chap. 'What are you doing here this time of the day?' I explained that I had a business appointment. Actually, you know, I was delivering a note for Mr. Thistlewaite. Anyhow, he asked me to have a drink. Well, I was looking particularly shabby that morning. I had on that old grey herring-bone suit, the one that belonged to my dad. The one I had altered. And I had my old boots on, the ones where the leather has worn off the toe. Well, I went into a bar with him, all the same. I couldn't have helped myself. He just took me by the arm and marched me in. Of course, he doesn't work or anything like that. His father is Sir Algernon Daley. They live in Belgrave Square. A proper mansion of a place they've got there, too. Well, Preston began asking me about my work and he seemed quite interested. Of course, the last time we met we were the same rank. It seemed funny seeing him as smart as smart, and me in Dad's old herring-bone suit. I asked him where his father placed all his insurance, all the same, and he said with the Welfare. Well, you'll never get on without cheek,

I thought, so I asked him whether there'd be any chance of transferring some to the Atlantic, because he must have a good few insurances going. Well, Preston was very nice, and said he'd speak to his father. And would I come to dinner with him. He'd like to talk over old times and all that. But I haven't got a dress suit, you see. And I remembered the time I'd dined at his place during the war. Just like one of those places you see in the pictures, Peter. Flunkeys and footmen. Marble! Well, I'd say that you could put the whole of the ground floor of this teashop into their hall."

"Go on!"

"Absolutely. A proper mansion, Peter."

"Must be well off."

"Shipping. That's what Sir Algernon is. Rolling!" Martin added.

"So what did you fix?"

"Well, I said I was working late just now, just as Carol keeps saying, I couldn't very well dine there with no dress suit, you see. Then he asked me to lunch at his Club and I said 'Right' and we fixed the date. It was only coming back in the Tube, when I sat looking at the hole in my boots, that I began to feel awkward about it. I really hadn't noticed my clothes much before, anyway. None of the chaps in the office, except Mr. Thistlewaite, are particularly dressy, are they? Not that we can afford to be, if it comes to that. And not that Mr. Thistlewaite holds a candle to Preston, either. There's something about *breeding*," he added, suddenly.

"Yes, you can tell it a mile off," Peter agreed.

"And that's how it is with Preston. He's different. Do you know," Martin said, "when I was standing up at the bar having a cocktail. . . ."

"Oh, you drank those things, did you?"

"Two!" Martin added. "I paid for the second round. It cost me four shillings."

"Go on!"

"A fact."

Peter Thomas whistled through his teeth.

"That's expensive if you like," he said, thoughtfully.

"Well, that's what they cost. Two shillings each. A Manhattan, the barman called it. I made a point of asking him the name."

"Well, you won't be able to do that very often," Peter said. "Two shillings each! My word!" and he whistled again through his teeth.

"But that's the way those people go on. If you want to mix with them, you've got to spend the money, Peter. You've got to have the clothes, too. I realized that as I stood up with Preston at the bar. I looked at his clothes. They were beautiful, Peter. Cut. Style. Material. There was class about them. He looked elegant, if you understand me. A proper toff."

"An overcoat, I suppose."

"Yes, and a bowler hat."

"Tall?"

"About six feet. Handsome as you like! He just has a way with him, too. Personality. He'd make you do *anything*. You just couldn't help yourself."

"Must be a great fellow," Peter mused. "Still, if you've got the money you can do a lot, I suppose. Fine feathers make fine birds, they say."

"Yes," Martin agreed. "But it isn't like that with Preston."

Martin sat twisting the pepper-pot between his fingers. After which he said:

"It's funny, Peter, but I want to be like that. In the war, I used to watch Preston, you know. The way he spoke. The easy way he moved. Even the way he smoked a cigarette. He did everything so gracefully. Nothing ever ruffled him. He seemed to know the answer to everything. Beautiful manners. Never awkward or out of place. Fitted in everywhere," and Martin still twisted the pepper-pot between his fingers.

"Well, what's wrong with you? You're all right as you are, ain't you?"

"Oh,"—and Martin shrugged his shoulders—"poor, self-conscious, shabby, no conversation, ordinary—yes, just ordinary. I realized that," he said, "the first time I took Carol out."

"How?"

"Oh,"—and Martin shrugged his shoulders again—"I just did."

"That's because you're not used to women's ways, I expect."

"I felt the same with Preston Daley," Martin said.

There was silence again. Still the pepper-pot had been twisted back and forth between the fingers of his right hand as it stretched across the table.

"No," he continued, "that's why I've decided to do something about it."

"What?"

"Oh, sell some of my War Savings—and lay out some capital on myself. Get some new clothes, boots, too. A new overcoat, perhaps. And keep a bit over for getting about."

"In what way?"

"Oh—well, things like taking Carol out on Tuesday week. I can't find the money for things like that out of my salary, Peter. Not if we're going up West."

"No." And after a pause: "Still, it's a bit rash, isn't it? It isn't like you, Martin, to go spending your money like that. Rather a saving sort, you've always struck me."

"But don't you see, Peter—if I mix with people like Preston, it'll mean getting business. I'll be earning commission. That's my idea. To get about a bit. Carol's used to people who know their way about, too."

"Ah!" Peter said, his eyes twinkling behind his magnifying spectacles, his red hair seeming to stand up even more fiercely from his head. "It seems to me that it's the girl down

at your place who's the *real* root of the trouble, my lad!" And he winked playfully. "Let's get back."

"Hello!" Mr. Hilton was now saying behind him. "I say! Better give you a pinch, Bowling. That's what you do with a new suit, don't you? But I say! Turn round!" And after regarding the suit critically: "I must say you look all right and no mistake. Where did you get it?"

"At Harding's, down the road."

"Off the peg?"

"Oh, no. I had it made."

"Expensive?"

"A bit more than I usually pay."

"Well, it suits you well and no mistake."

"Yes, I think it's all right, too," Martin said, a little self-consciously.

On returning to the counter, Peter Thomas came up to him.

"Not bad," he said critically. "Not bad at all, Martin. I think you're right about the stripes. By the way, I see that Club you're going to lunch at to-day is in Dover Street."

"That's right. On the left-hand side going up."

"Well, the thing that occurred to me," Peter said, "is that you'll have to look pretty slippy if you're going all that way, and then be back within the hour."

"Yes. I'd thought of that, too. I'm going to ask Mr. Thistlewaite to give me extra time."

"Do you think he will?"

"Well, this is *business*!" Martin replied. "That's the whole idea."

"Oh, I see," Peter smiled, disbelievingly.

The rest of the staff arrived in due course. Mr. Brown commented most favourably on the new suit, pausing in front of the counter to admire it more fully; Norman, the office boy, looked at it a little enviously; Miss Smith gave

him a pinch when she came to the counter later in the morning. Mr. Drake passed no comment.

The next person to remark upon it was Mr. Thistlewaite, the Branch Manager. When Martin was called into his private room during the morning to bring in the policies for signature, Mr. Thistlewaite looked at him for some moments. "Bowling," he said, at last, "are we paying you too much money—or what?" and Martin noticed that his eyes were smiling behind his horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Oh, I don't think so, sir," Martin replied, "but we have to have a new suit now and again," and he felt elated that his choice had, on all sides, been so well received. He had certainly laid out his money wisely, he thought again, and he felt extremely satisfied.

"Well," Mr. Thistlewaite said, leaning back in his chair, "you certainly look very smart, Bowling. I'm glad, too. I like the men on the counter to be smartly turned out. I'll have to have a word with Thomas," he mused. "What are you earning now?"

"One hundred and seventy-five, sir."

"That's right. One-seven-five," and Mr. Thistlewaite still leant back in his chair, rapping a paper-knife thoughtfully on his desk. "How about getting some more Life business?" he asked presently, looking up. "That commission on the Thompson case helped, didn't it?"

"Yes, sir. But that's all gone."

"On the suit?" he smiled.

"No, sir. On the move."

"Oh, yes." Again the paper-knife was being rapped slowly on the desk. "Let's see," he said, "you lost your father this year, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Cut your mother up quite a bit, didn't it?"

"Yes, sir. She's ill at the present time, too. My sister and I are looking after her."

"How do you manage to do that? Isn't your sister working, too?"

"Yes, sir. But we get up early and see to everything before we leave. Then our landlady and her husband keep an eye on her during the day."

"I see." And the paper-knife ceased to rap on the desk. "Well, you keep cheerful enough, Bowling," he said.

"Have to, sir."

"I should try and get some more new business, if I were you. Not only does it help you financially, but it makes you more valuable to your Company, you know."

"Yes, sir. That's really what I wanted to ask you. Would it be convenient if I took longer for my lunch to-day? I've been asked to lunch at the Porchester Club."

Mr. Thistlewaite looked up once more, this time a puzzled expression on his face.

"The Porchester Club! Who in the world do you know at the Porchester Club, Bowling?"

"Mr. Daley—Mr. Preston Daley."

"Daley?"

"The son of Sir Algernon Daley, sir."

"What? The shipping magnate?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know *him*?" Mr. Thistlewaite asked, unbelievably. "How in the world did you get to know him?"

"In the war, sir."

Mr. Thistlewaite rose from his chair and walked over to a shelf and drew down a copy of *Who's Who*. "Daley," Martin heard him say to himself, as he turned the leaves. "Algernon Daley?"

"Yes, sir."

"Algernon Daley, *Bart.* That's the fellow." And after reading for a moment, he replaced the book on the shelf and walked back to his desk. "So you know the Daleys, eh?" and he adjusted his chair carefully before sitting down.

Martin noted Mr. Thistlewaite's blue and white spotted bow beneath his winged collar, and thought how well it suited him. And his black coat and waistcoat, and striped trousers, and spats. And his long lean well-bred face, which Joyce had said had reminded her of a lawyer's or a barrister's. His thinning hair, brushed back from the temples.

"Yes, sir. I ran into him again the other day."

"Well, his father is a very powerful man, Bowling," Mr. Thistlewaite said, his finger-tips together. "I'd like to get his business very much. It would be a fine thing for the Branch. He's on a good many companies, too. I should contact the son. Take him out to lunch now and again and put it down to expenses. I'll sign them. Try and worm your way in. And I'd like to meet him, myself. You might arrange that, Bowling. Perhaps it will be easier for me to get down to brass tacks than for you. Of course, you would get the commission if we got the business. But really, Bowling, there's a wonderful opportunity there. It's staring you in the face. Many young men have made their reputations by getting a slice of business like Daley could give you. I really am pleased to hear this. Have you mentioned anything to the son? I mean, have you told him what you're doing?"

"Oh, yes, sir," Martin replied, hurriedly. "He's seeing his father to find out if there's any chance of transferring any business. It's with the Welfare now, most of it."

"Well done, Bowling! Well done! I never looked upon you as a thruster. But really, this is most encouraging. It really is. Well done!" and still Mr. Thistlewaite sat back in his chair, his finger-tips together.

"That's why I bought the new suit," Martin explained, feeling more sure of himself, his heart buoyed up by Mr. Thistlewaite's kind words.

"Splendid, Bowling! The right idea. I like that. Really, my boy, you've shown me a new side to your character. I never thought you had it in you. I only wish that all my

staff would be so far-seeing. Really, Bowling, I'm delighted. And if I may say so," he added smilingly, looking him up and down, "you have done the job well."

"Thank you, sir. I think the suit isn't too bad either."

"Well, you go to lunch with him to-day, Bowling, and see how the land lies. It would be a very wonderful thing if the Atlantic could get some of his business. Take your time. Don't hurry back. And you're going to the Porchester Club? Well, it's some years since I was there," and Mr. Thistlewaite seemed to be reflecting upon his last visit. "Yes," he added, a moment later, "it's a wonderful Club, that, with a fine membership. I believe Sir Hugh Caldecott is a member."

"The Chairman, sir?"

"Yes."

When Martin eventually left Mr. Thistlewaite's office he felt even more satisfied with the way that events were moving. They were improving every minute. He had had a most friendly interview with Mr. Thistlewaite, and now Sir Hugh Caldecott was a member of Preston Daley's Club! It seemed to bring him more into line with the world of big business, in keeping, too, with his splendid appearance to-day. How different good clothes made you feel, he thought. Why, he had even talked quite confidentially with Mr. Thistlewaite! But poor old Peter Thomas did not seem to understand. He was just an old stick-in-the-mud. Mr. Thistlewaite had cottoned on to the idea right away, and had even encouraged him. Peter Thomas had only smiled. But then, Peter Thomas could never introduce any real big business to the Company because he did not know the people. As a matter of fact, if he took Peter Thomas with him to lunch to-day he would look completely out of place in that old Army raincoat that he had bought from the Disposals Board. And his short black coat was turning green round the collar. No, Martin was highly delighted with the

way his plans were going. He realized that he had not told his mother or Joyce where the money had come from to pay for the new clothes, nor that they had been specially made for him. But women would not understand; they would only question the wisdom. Peter Thomas was almost doing that already. No, it was only people like Mr. Thistlewaite and himself who understood the importance of such things. Carol did, too, but she expected good clothes as a matter of course. And good manners. But manners went with the world of good clothes—the world where things happened naturally, easily and comfortably. Not the shabby little world that his colleagues knew. No, he had realized that very soon after knowing Carol. He had thought Bellamy's Café quite a nice place, but the way that she had said: "But we can't go there!" had been his first awakening. And, of course, the café that she had taken him to, the one with bronze swing-doors, near the cinema, had been much nicer. It had naturally cost a little more, but the china had been thinner and they had a better assortment of pastries, and they had had coloured linen serviettes, too. Oh, yes, if a job was worth doing, it was worth doing well. Better not go out at all, if you had to go in a shabby way. At least, where Carol was concerned, it was completely out of the question. Besides, it was not that she demanded those things; she just made you feel that way. That was just how it was with Carol. She was aristocratic looking, as his mother had said. She seemed to have breeding, just as Preston had. Her hands, too, never seemed out of place or awkward; they moved as naturally as Preston's. And she had poise. Even in that smart tea-shop she had seemed to dominate the room as she had walked in, wearing a grey striped flannel costume, with a coloured scarf hung carelessly round her neck. And he had felt so uncomfortable in his shiny blue suit, and had spent most of the meal trying to hide his frayed cuffs, as he continuously picked up pieces of pastry that had been scat-

tered about the tablecloth by his fork. Now, he always ate his pastry with his fork. That was the Saturday afternoon that had first given him the idea of selling some of his War Bonds.

Now he was going to lunch at the Porchester Club, the Club that Sir Hugh Caldecott belonged to. A transformation had taken place. What an amazing influence a sense of well-being made to your outlook on life and to your attitude towards it, he thought. Just now he had been talking to one of the Branch's biggest agents. Usually Mr. Drake attended to Mr. Howard when he called, but Martin had dealt with him to-day and he had discussed matters with him with a sense of equality. Before, he had been rather intimidated by this large florid man, with his big voice, who was renowned in the district for his dictatorial ways. It amazed Martin that having this sense of equality had seemed to lessen Mr. Howard's dictatorial manner towards him, as if Mr. Howard had quickly sensed Martin's sudden superiority and had respected it. But poor old Peter Thomas would never understand that. Nor would the rest of the staff, except Mr. Thistlewaite.

At half-past twelve Martin put down his pen, opened his desk and took out his own towel and the small tin containing his half-used cake of soap.

"Just off?" Peter Thomas asked.

"Yes. I've got to be there by one o'clock."

"Well, I've just been thinking. You can catch a Number Two bus outside here, to Hyde Park Corner, and then catch another bus going down Piccadilly and get off at the Ritz Hotel. Dover Street's on the left, then."

"That's right, Peter. I'd thought of that, too. Or a Number Thirty-six bus."

"Yes—or a Number Thirty-six."

Retiring to the dressing-room, he took time over his toilet, and emerged, later, in his new thick overcoat, his bowler hat on his head and his umbrella under his arm.

"Well, think of me in the A.B.C., Martin, when you're drinking your champagne and smoking your cigars. If you get the chance to pinch an extra one, remember I'm very partial to a nice cigar."

Martin laughed.

"I'll bring you mine," he said. "I don't smoke them."

He sauntered happily from the office, through the portico, down the steps that Mrs. Green whitened so carefully each morning, and out into the keen east wind, buttoning his overcoat about his neck and walking quickly across the road to the first bus stop. Trams rattled their way along the frozen track. People on the pavements seemed to be walking more quickly than usual. Martin jumped on to a No. 2 bus and was soon being carried along past the Oval cricket ground, which, from the top of the bus, looked bleak and deserted. Funny to think of the crowds that had surged round there to see Surrey play last summer, the sun beating down, the flag at the mast, with white-flannelled figures moving on the soft green turf. Yes, it was very exciting, all this, he thought. On Tuesday he was taking Carol up West, too. Where should he take her? Soho, he had been told by Mr. Howard this morning, was quite nice and remarkably inexpensive. You could get a nice dinner up there for three or four shillings. "Continental style," Mr. Howard had added, having explained how he and his wife were forced to have their meals out just now, as their pipes had burst at home with the frost, and describing how the water had ruined their drawing-room and what a good thing it was that the damage was covered by his insurance, as it was going to cost a pretty penny to put it right. So he might take Carol to one of those Soho restaurants. "You get quite a drinkable bottle of wine there, too, for a few bob." Yes, that would be the sort of place. And, of course, he had already bought the tickets for the theatre. Dress circle seats were certainly expensive, but, after all, he could

not take Carol to the upper circle or to the pit. And he would watch Preston ordering the food at lunch and gain a few tips. He did not want Carol to know that he had never dined up West before. He was not going to make any mistakes this time.

The thought of Tuesday night thrilled him. Being alone with Carol made him forget everything. He became aware only of her. Sitting beside her in the cinema the last time that he had taken her, she had seemed a little distracted, and had hardly spoken. But he had felt her beside him; their knees had touched sometimes, too. Once she had gripped his arm, during an exciting moment in the film. How it had thrilled, the touch of those fingers! "It's all right, Carol. He isn't going to be shot, really. He'll escape," he had whispered. She had really believed that the hero was going to be shot! Weren't girls funny? It gave him a feeling of ownership to be able to comfort her, then, to take care of her, to drive her fears away. He had longed to put his arm round the white-mackintoshed figure beside him and draw her closely to him. No one would have seen in the dark, anyway. But he was glad, afterwards.

"I can't understand people displaying their emotions like that, Martin," she had said, when the lights had gone up in the interval, disclosing various couples leaning close to each other, the man's arm encircling a head on his shoulder. "I wouldn't parade my feelings like that with the man I loved."

"No."

"It's so cheap," she had said. And then she had added: "I hate things that are cheap."

"So do I."

And, after a pause:

"I don't expect any of these people really know what love means, anyway."

"No."

But when the lights had become dim again, he had felt an overwhelming desire, all the same, to do as the people in the cheaper seats in front were doing, but that could not be. He began wondering if it could ever be. He had realized for so long now that he had been aware of Carol's mouth as she talked to him. He had lived so much in a world of his own thoughts—thoughts that were now finding complete expression in his mind—that there had been moments when he had almost forgotten that he was not still in a dream, and he had moved closer towards her. . . . Extraordinary, he thought, how Carol had so completely taken possession of his mind. It seemed to belong to her utterly, now. Soon the bus would be passing Victoria and he would change at Hyde Park Corner. Then, on another bus down Piccadilly. Then Preston. Preston was going to speak to his father about his insurances. If only he could hear something definite to-day, he might even take Carol on to have some supper after the theatre on Tuesday, to celebrate the good news. She seemed quite interested in his business, too, and was going to see if some of Severn & Browning's business could not be placed through the Atlantic. She had promised to make inquiries. That, too, had seemed to draw them closer together. Discussing things like that seemed to make them have one common object, mutually. That thought thrilled him even more. Like being married, he thought.

The bus rumbled up Grosvenor Place. A fog seemed to hang over the trees in Hyde Park, and it seemed darker up here than in Camberwell. He alighted outside St. George's Hospital and was soon walking to a bus stop across the road, but finding by the clock outside the Park that it was only ten minutes to one, he decided to walk to Dover Street, the keen frosty air biting into his flesh. The fog seemed, too, to be creeping slowly over the trees in the Green Park. By the time that he reached the Ritz Hotel the shops on his left sprang suddenly into a blaze of electricity. The buses

and traffic, too, sprang into light, as if switched on by some invisible hand. A yellow fog was descending upon Piccadilly, slowly but surely, like the poison gas that he had seen creeping stealthily towards him in the war. He buttoned his coat more tightly around his neck and turned into Dover Street, ignoring the man selling gardenias on the corner, and caring little for the glaring news sheets displayed there. "French Cabinet resigns." What the Hell did that matter, anyway? They were always resigning. What did anything matter beside his own affairs?

He entered the Porchester Club, and a man in uniform leant forward through the glass partition to his left.

"Who were you wanting, sir?" he asked.

"Mr. Preston Daley."

"Smith!"

A page-boy on his right leapt immediately to his feet.

"Take this gentleman to the cloakroom," the hall porter said, with great dignity. "Then show him to the lounge. Mr. Daley has not arrived yet, sir," he added.

Martin followed the page down the passage and hung his bowler hat and new coat on a peg, putting his umbrella beneath. He was led into the cloakroom and the page waited outside whilst he washed his hands for the fourth time that day, and again brushed his carefully brilliantined hair, lifting the yellow foulard handkerchief still higher from his breast-pocket. He was then led back along the same passage, and into a large room to his left, and the page-boy was holding open the door.

"This way, sir. Will you wait in here."

Then, with the slightest click of his heels, the page-boy departed briskly in the direction of the hall porter.

Martin walked into the smoking-room. Large portraits looked sombrely down at him from their dark gilded frames. Large leather settees seemed to line the walls. Men stood talking quietly together; some sat. Fires burned crisply in

two large open grates. A small group sat around each, with glasses in their hands. The effect was of a long dark brown room, infinitely soothing, lit by magic crystals from the ceiling. There were large leather arm-chairs, too, and writing-desks and a long table. A babble of quiet conversation. Waiters were moving quietly, too, about the room, trays in their hands supporting small but elegant glasses. An occasional greeting was heard across the room for the latest arrival. A man would press a button behind him and a club waiter would appear again through the door at the end. Others walked in and moved quietly to a table near the window, selecting one of the daily newspapers arranged with such symmetry along its polished mahogany surface, and then walking to the nearest vacant chair. The carpets on the floors were soft. Through the front window Martin saw that the fog had grown thicker, and he revelled again in the quiet luxury and warmth of his new surroundings. He wondered whether Sir Hugh Caldecott would be coming in. Sitting upright in that leather arm-chair, near the door, he had a fine view of the room. No one could enter or leave without his seeing them. And what would he do if he saw Sir Hugh? Well, of course, Sir Hugh would not know who he was. But he could introduce himself. Yes, he must do that. They were on the same footing, now that he was Preston's guest at the Porchester Club. "Hello, Sir Hugh," he would say. "How-do-you-do? I'm Martin Bowling, of the Atlantic Insurance Company. I'm lunching with Preston Daley." Of course, Sir Hugh would not know him from Adam, but he would sit with him for a while, perhaps, and maybe they would drink one of those drinks that the club waiters seemed to be continuously carrying in response to the various ringings of the bell. And the clock over the mantelpiece told him that it was five minutes past one, so Preston would be here any moment now. If only Carol could see him here! He would give a great deal for Carol to

see him in these fine surroundings. He had told her about this invitation to lunch, but how he would enlarge upon it over their dinner on Tuesday!

When Preston arrived, Martin would rise from his chair quietly, just as that man opposite had just done. He had decided about that. No undue excitement, either. They would shake hands. "Hello, Bowling. What will you drink?" and Preston's hand would reach casually for the button in the wall behind Martin's chair. "Oh—I'll have a Manhattan, thanks." He felt glad that he had asked the barman for the name of that cocktail. It gave him renewed confidence to be able to behave as the other members did. If it had not been for that chance meeting with Preston in Piccadilly, he would never have known what to ask for. Beer? No, you could not drink beer in the smoking-room of the Porchester. A Manhattan. Yes, that was the right thing to drink. And he must remember to watch Preston carefully during lunch, the way he ordered the food and chose the wine, the brand of cigars he smoked. He would watch everything most carefully. He must adopt Preston's methods now. He would act that way on Tuesday.

"Lord Stirling," a page-boy called deferentially, and an elderly man on Martin's left looked up from his *Financial News*. "You are wanted on the telephone, my Lord," he said respectfully, having approached his chair.

"Who is it?"

"Her Ladyship, I think, my Lord."

"Right."

The elderly man was tall. He wore check plaid trousers beneath his black coat, and his feet were long and thin, encased in beautifully polished black shoes. He rose, and replacing the *Financial News* on the long mahogany table, walked quietly from the room.

Lord Stirling! A thrill ran through Martin's veins. If only he had known that before! He had been watching the lean,

grey-haired figure on his left for some minutes, wondering who it could be. Lord Stirling! The great Lord Stirling! Wouldn't Carol be thrilled to know that he had been sitting cheek by jowl with a Cabinet Minister in the hallowed portals of the Porchester Club! And wouldn't old Peter Thomas be surprised! Really, this was most exciting! Perhaps that other grey-haired man near the window was a lord, too. Or that bald-headed man, whose face Martin had seen so many times reproduced in the newspapers. He would like to know who everyone was. But Preston would know. Above all, he must keep himself controlled. No undue excitement. Even Lord Stirling had walked from the room as if time was of no account, although his wife had been waiting to speak to him at the other end of the telephone! No one hurried in this world. He had noticed that with Preston in the old days. It was a leisurely world, this, quiet—and peaceful. It seemed filled with repose, as the few inhabitants who were at that moment in the smoking-room of the Porchester Club were filled with repose, also. Sitting, walking across the room, drinking near the fireplace, or reading, each member seemed to possess a glorious repose, which Martin watched with fascinated eyes. He was aware that his own hands were hot and sticky and he dried them surreptitiously with his handkerchief. He was aware, too, of his yellow foulard tie, which seemed to be the only one in that smoking-room. He became aware, also, that his new boots were large and ungainly beside the well-polished shoes of his near neighbours; he drew his feet nearer to his chair, so that he could not see them. He was aware also of the smell of the new brilliantine on his hair. But still, what did that matter really. The man standing under the clock above the mantelpiece had just suggested going in to lunch. The three other men who had been drinking with him, passed slowly in front of Martin's chair.

“I'm going south to-morrow, Tim.”

"Monte?"

"No, Cannes. I'm joining Mona there."

"Well, keep away from Monte," the tall man laughed. "It cost me a fortune last year."

"The tables?"

"No, the women. You lead the way, Basil."

"Seen Vivienne?"

"No, not lately."

The voices finally died away as they passed through the carved mahogany door to the left.

Now the bald-headed man had walked over and was sitting on the fender-seat under the clock, in front of the fire. It was now twenty minutes past one. The bald-headed man was reading *The Tatler*. "A brown sherry," he said, looking up as a club waiter passed, and the waiter, with a bow, passed on down the room and disappeared flat-footedly through the door at the end. The fog outside seemed to have grown thicker. It was only just possible now to see the outline of the building across the narrow street. Preston had evidently been held up.

The minutes dragged by. The bald-headed man, having finished his brown sherry, replaced *The Tatler* on the long mahogany table and left the room. His face seemed familiar. Martin was always seeing it reproduced in the newspapers, and he wished that he knew who he was. But Preston would know. And now Lord Stirling had returned. How beautifully he walked! He was walking over to a writing-desk now. If Martin wasn't much mistaken, he had taken a telegraph form from the rack in front of him as he sat down. Yes, he *was* writing a telegram. Well, I suppose, Martin thought, that he has just spoken to his wife and now he has to send a telegram to somebody. Perhaps someone is coming to stay and he is wiring about the trains. Or perhaps it was something even more important. Maybe it was some affair of State! That thought gave Martin a sense of infinite

importance. An onlooker in the great political game! Now Lord Stirling had torn up the form and was writing it out again. It must be something very important to need such careful thought. Lord Stirling was sitting back in his chair now, a gold pencil in his hand. Now he was writing again, crossing out a word, just as he, himself, did in the Post Office! It really is remarkable, he thought, that the great Lord Stirling should behave just as he did with a telegraph form! Now he was counting up the words. Fancy Lord Stirling counting the words on his own telegram! Really, this was most exciting. What a story he would have to tell Peter Thomas when he got back! And now Lord Stirling was calling one of the waiters. Yes, the club waiter had taken the telegram form away to have it sent off. He would love to know what that telegram contained. Lord Stirling was looking anxious, too, as he rose from the desk and walked into the far corner with a newspaper. He had better read the papers carefully for the next day or so; he might read some startling Cabinet developments! Really, this was an education! The group by the fire at the other end of the room was moving now. Yes, they must be going in to lunch, too. So were the two men to his right.

"So you had good fun, Chilton."

"Wonderful. I've taken the same shoot next season."

"Well, if the sport's so good, I suppose it's worth while."

"You go first, Humphrey. Yes, plenty of birds. Good fishing, too."

"We went to Brioni, Chilton. Saw the Dixons there."

"Really?"

The door closed again. The fog seemed to have descended with a darker pall as he looked towards the window. Now it was completely dark outside, thick and impenetrable. Not even the light from the costumier's on the other side of the road showed through the blanket of soot-laden air outside. There seemed a sudden silence. The ticking of the clock

over the fireplace could be clearly heard from Martin's chair, interrupted by the snores of a bearded man on Lord Stirling's left, who was lying back in his leather arm-chair, his face to the fire, his mouth wide open. And Lord Stirling was still quietly reading his newspaper, his grey hair parted in the middle, a monocle in his eye. In fact, apart from the sleeping gentleman, Lord Stirling was the only other man in the smoking-room with Martin at that moment. How simple life is, he thought. I can walk across the room, now, and talk to Lord Stirling, and Lord Stirling will accept me and talk to me, too, because I am in his Club and am a friend of Preston's. Wouldn't that surprise Peter Thomas, eh? A Cabinet Minister! And Peter, wearing his Disposals Board raincoat and his black coat turning green at the collar! Poor old Peter! Martin must remember to carry a true picture of this in his mind to give to Mr. Thistlewaite, on his return, and to Carol on Tuesday. Of course, Peter would never understand. Mr. Tibbit, on the other hand, would be immensely interested in what he would have to tell. This was fascinating, the room, the people, the beautifully bound books, the carved marble mantelpiece, everything was new and thrilling. His eyes roamed quietly about the stillness of the room. . . . The bald-headed man returned again to the smoking-room, picked up *The Bystander* from the mahogany-topped table and returned again to his seat by the fireplace, his back to the fire. Before sitting down, he pressed a bell. A waiter appeared immediately from the door at the end of the room and, seeing the bald-headed man's eyes raised, came towards him.

"A coffee. Old brandy, the one I had yesterday. And a small Corona."

"Yes, Sir James."

The waiter retired once more; the bald-headed man returned to *The Bystander*. Sir James? Sir James who? Martin wished that he could remember that face. He must be

important to have his photograph so often in the newspapers. New faces were coming in now, too. A club waiter had just put more coals on the fires, which had woken the bearded man, who rose, stretched himself, and walked from the room, yawning brazenly behind his hand on the way. The room seemed filling up on all sides. A great many new faces. The room seemed suddenly filled with cigar smoke, too. Lord Stirling was still reading his newspaper in the far corner, and the bald-headed man was now in the midst of a circle round the fire, talking to the men on his right and left, and lighting his small Corona with a wooden taper. A club waiter passed, looking at Martin curiously for the third time.

"Can I help you, sir?" he asked, bending over his silver tray.

"I was waiting for Mr. Daley. Mr. Preston Daley," and Martin said that loudly, so that the men around him should know.

"I'll make inquiries from the hall porter, sir. I haven't seen him in the club to-day."

The waiter passed on flat-footedly. Lord Stirling rose from his seat, and replacing his newspaper on the mahogany table, left the smoking-room. The bald-headed man was laughing. The first four men returned, one of whom was going to see Mona, Martin remembered, and drew up chairs near to him. They must have eaten their lunch very hurriedly, he thought. The fog seemed thicker than ever outside. The room seemed fuller than ever. His feet seemed larger. The scent of his new brilliantine seemed stronger. The big clock on the mantelpiece, over the bald gentleman's head, showed him that it was a quarter past two. Peter Thomas must now have returned from the A.B.C. . . .

"Mr. Preston Daley is out of town till the end of the week, sir. I have ascertained that from the regular porter who has just come on duty."

"Oh."

"Would you like to leave a note, sir?"

"Oh—er—no. I'll telephone."

The waiter bowed and passed on, and the door at the end closed quietly. The bald-headed man seemed to laugh louder than ever at that moment, a piercing laugh which seemed to penetrate the room. Martin rose slowly from his chair. Then he turned and walked hurriedly from the room. Reaching the cloakroom, he drew down his new winter overcoat, which he put on very slowly. Then, clutching his bowler hat and umbrella, he walked down the corridor and out into the fog-bound street.

VII

THE FIRST TWO WEEKS of December were memorable ones for Mary Ellen Tibbit, or Carol, as her few intimates called her. The 2nd of December was her birthday. Annually, a small party had been given at Five Linden Terrace to celebrate the event, when the Potters next door, Bert Freeman and his sister, and a few other neighbours had been invited to join in the fun. Hers was the only birthday now celebrated in the Tibbit family, as Walter and Millicent Tibbit had both agreed that they were getting too old for birthdays. So December was a big month for entertaining in the Tibbit household, with Carol's birthday and the Christmas festivities falling so closely together.

This year, however, Carol decided against having a party. Martin Bowling, upstairs, had wanted to take her to the theatre again on her birthday night. Walter Tibbit had argued strongly in favour of a nice companionable little gathering at home. Millicent Tibbit had not cared very much either way. Joyce Bowling had suggested holding the celebrations over until the Saturday, so that they could all go to the sports dance which Brown Brothers were holding, and an added inducement was held out that there were going to be prizes in the spotlight dance. The prizes had been on show in their canteen, and there were some very nice things to be won—a silver cake-dish, down to more personal things, such as cigarettes for the gentlemen, and chocolates, combs and vanity cases for the ladies. But even these inducements could not influence Carol. It was sweet of them, very, very sweet of them. No, she, like her mother, did not want

to celebrate birthdays any more. She was twenty-three on December 2nd, and now that she was nearing the quarter-century mark, she did not wish to be reminded each year of creeping *anno domini*. So, if it was all the same to them, she would *really* prefer not to have a party this year. In any case she was working late that night.

There had been a long argument about that. Young Martin Bowling, who had been in the front room talking to her father as she came in the night before, had been especially eloquent. It was ridiculous to work so hard. He had never heard of any man working his staff the way that Mr. Severn did. Surely, if she explained that it was her birthday, Mr. Severn would give her the night off. It was nothing less than slave-driving. Then Martin could take her to the theatre, too.

"Well, Mr. Severn is going to Constantinople next week, Martin," she explained, "and there's such a lot of work to be done before he goes."

"Well, I think it's rotten," he replied. "What difference can one night make? Your birthday, too!"

How could she explain? She just couldn't. She had promised to spend her birthday with Robin, which was the only way that she wanted to spend that evening, anyway. But seeing her father's obvious disappointment, she had hurriedly suggested having a small party at home the night *after* her birthday, when Robin would be engaged at a City dinner, and Walter Tibbit had been immensely pleased. Martin had quickly suggested that he would like to join in giving the party, too. Why not make a joint one?

"Capital!" her father exclaimed. "Mother will do the food."

"I'll see to the drinks," Martin said.

"Very kind of you, Martin," her father replied. "Very kind. Just a few bottles of beer and perhaps a bottle of whisky, if it isn't asking too much."

"A bottle of port for the ladies," Joyce Bowling sug-

gested, joining in the argument later, as she returned, too, from her work. "We ought to have port for the ladies."

"Then you can ask your friends, too, Martin. It will make quite a nice big party. Really, you know, this is going to make a nice little change. We shan't have held a party like this since Carol's christening, you know, when we had all the relatives over. Most of them are gone now," he added, to Martin. "Mother's family were never long livers."

"We ought to have a cake, too," Martin said.

"This isn't a birthday party, though!"

"Still, we ought to have a cake."

"And we can use the whole house. I suppose we'd better ask the James', upstairs?"

"We won't ask them James', Walter," her mother said, entering the room, in her black satin dress. "There's something very fishy about the way those James' are going on. Here he is lying in his bed of a morning and going out after his dinner, and never coming home till after midnight. A fine way to go on, I must say! We might be harbouring a burglar for all *we* know. No, I'm not asking the James' to any party of mine," she said, fiddling irritably with the ornaments on the shelf. "Not if I know it!"

"Well, we can't very well leave the James' out if we're having a party, Mother. We must be sociable, you know."

"Well, I don't care for the way things are looking with those James', Walter. I've noticed it for the last few weeks. Suddenly starting coming home long after midnight every night, dressed up like an Italian organ grinder, with his black hat. A proper sort of villain he looks, too, when he's in need of a shave first thing of a morning, as I've seen him. No, it all looks very fishy to me, Walter. Suddenly wearing a butterfly collar and a new black coat. Dressed up like a peacock!"

"Well, you can't go by appearances, Mother."

"Appearances! And him behind with the rent, too!"

"Well, he's paying it off in instalments."

"Fiddlesticks! I wish we'd never taken those James' in. There's something very fishy about them. You mark my words!"

"Well, I don't say as they're very companionable, Mother. But there's no harm in them."

"How do you know he isn't one of those cat burglars, Walter? How do you know if he isn't a forger? You don't know. Nor do I. All I know," her mother had continued, fidgeting now with her hair, "is that it's all very peculiar with him coming home round about half-past six for all those months, and now he's lazing about the place of a morning and coming home long past midnight, dressed up like a dandy. How do you know that he isn't some sort of a Raffles?"

"Oh, come, Mother, you do get some ideas!"

"Well! He don't come to any party of ours, if I know anything about it. Very likely planning his robberies lying in his bed of a morning. No, Walter, I don't like the look of it. I'll be very glad to see the back of them."

"They aren't leaving, are they?" Martin asked.

"No such luck!" Mrs. Tibbit replied, walking sedately from the room. "But they won't come to any party of mine, Walter, and that's flat!"

So the party was planned without including the James'. After all, as Joyce Bowling had pointed out, with their mother ill, the guests could not very well go upstairs to their part of the house, so the James' need not feel slighted if they were not invited.

Carol listened to their plans until going down to her own room to take off her things, and later in the evening, she had her supper in the kitchen, hearing her father eulogizing again over young Martin Bowling, upstairs.

"Now, there's a nice young fellow, if ever I saw one. Pleasant, nicely spoken, very companionable, and in his new

striped suit he looks very gentlemanly, too. Quite refined. I'd like to have a son like that, Mother. Nice to go about with. Go to football matches of a Saturday afternoon, when we both came back from work. Someone to talk to. It *would* be nice to have a young man about the house, Mother, wouldn't it?"

"And then, off he'd go and marry some slip of a girl, Walter, and leave you. That's the way children always serve you."

"Well, Carol hasn't," her father pointed out, sticking his fork into his steak pie.

"Well, she's young yet."

"I'm twenty-three to-morrow, Daddy."

"So you are, dear! Well, *tempus fugit*, you know. Don't it, Mother?"

"What?"

"*Tempus fugit*. Time flies, you know. Carol being twenty-three to-morrow. Seems like the other day, don't it?"

"I suppose so," her mother said, helping herself to a glass of stout from the quart bottle on the table. "And a fine time I had, too. If you knew the time I had bringing you into the world, my girl, you'd think more of your mother than you do."

Of course, her mother always talked like that. But underneath, there was a wealth of kindness in her large frame. And Carol, looking at the untidy tablecloth, with its quart bottle of stout near the cruet in the middle, was contrasting her surroundings with those of the morrow. Robin! Dear, sweet, kind and darling Robin! They were not going to Soho any more, now. When she had been taken to the theatre by Martin Bowling the other night, he had wanted to take her to Mordoni's! It was quite fantastic! That Martin, too, should suggest Mordoni's by name had come as a shock to her, for she had imagined that no one knew Mordoni's, save she and Robin. It belonged so utterly to her own little

world. How cleverly she had led Martin to the restaurant farther down the road! Little did he know. The food was bad at Mordoni's, she had said. The food was bad! Their *Moules Marinière* was delicious. But food did not matter at Mordoni's with Robin. It was Robin.

Their dreary meal was finally over, and she helped her mother clear the table and wash up the dishes. Her father sat after supper trying to mend the alarm clock in the corner, while her mother read a magazine near the kitchen. Then, when her father found that the spring of the clock was broken, he put it down, and discussed the party for the day after to-morrow. Carol was able to slip away to her own room about half-past nine—not to sleep, but to lie thinking of the morrow.

Her mother woke her in the morning, with a cup of tea.

"Happy returns, dear. It isn't much, but your father and I wanted to give you a little something," and Carol saw a small parcel lying on her bed, which she opened hurriedly. A pair of gloves. How very sweet her parents were! Just what she wanted, too. She would wear them to-night. And she dressed in a most happy mood, humming a song:

*"A little bird sang up in a tree,
Heigho. Heigho.
And that little bird had a message for me,
Heigho. Heigho.
He said that my lover from over the sea
Was sailing his little boat homewards to me,
And when he reached harbour—then married we'd be,
Heigho. Heigho."*

"You seem happy, dear," her mother called from the kitchen.

"Yes, darling. Who wouldn't be? Besides, my gloves are lovely. I've tried them on."

"Oh—that's good. I'm cooking you some nice kidneys for your breakfast, as a special treat."

“Lovely!”

How sweet life can be! How sweet and kind the world when you're as happy as I am, she thought, and she appeared in the kitchen a moment later, feeling radiantly happy.

“Hello, dear,” her father said, entering the room. “Many happy returns,” and he kissed her warmly. “Looking as pretty as a picture.”

“The gloves are lovely, Daddy.”

“Oh—well. I'm glad you like them, dear. Only a little trifle, you know. 'Tisn't much, but it's just a little something. Mother chose them.”

“They're lovely,” Carol said again.

Then she ate her kidneys, sitting at the table listening to further ideas for the party to-morrow. Her father thought that it would be a good idea to ask the James', after all. He did not think they would come, but it would not be very sociable to give a party, with the James' living in the house and not ask them. So a vote had been taken and Carol had thrown the casting vote, deciding that they should be asked. Her father was going to try and catch Mr. James as he left the house and ask him. “But his times are so irregular now,” he said, wagging his head. Then Carol went back into her room, and put on her new hat and the smart new navy coat that Joyce Bowling had got for her at a special price from Brown Brothers.

“The gloves are lovely,” she said again, returning to the kitchen.

“Oh”—and her father was trying to appear nonchalant about them. “Just a little trifle, dear. Though I must say, they do look nice, Mother, don't they?”

Presently, she was walking happily up the stairs. On the hat-stand in the hall, she found a small brown-paper parcel. “For Carol,” she read. She opened it. A small cardboard box, filled with cotton-wool. Oh—a necklace. Oh, how sweet of Martin! She examined it. How very sweet of Martin. But

what a pity that he had spent all that money on a gold necklace. She did not like criticizing anyone who had been so kind, but she did not wear necklaces. At least, she could not very well wear one like this. And he must have saved up a long time to buy her that. It must have cost much more than he could afford. How very sweet of Martin! She let it hang from her newly gloved hand. What a pity, though, that he had spent his money on buying this. It looked like one of those little chains that came out of crackers at Christmas-time. The chain, itself, was quite pretty; it was the funny little pendant that it supported, that jarred. But she must remember to thank him to-night. Oh, of course, she would not be seeing him to-night! . . . Well, she had better write a note when she got back and put it on the hall-stand, so that he would see it in the morning when he left for his work. Of course, Martin would expect her to wear it. Well, she could wear it at the party to-morrow night, when some of the neighbours were coming in, and she would have to remember to put it on whenever she went out with Martin in future! Yes, as her father had said last night, it really would be rather fun to have a brother like Martin Bowling. He was such a reliable boy, straightforward and kind. And he seemed to be developing. He seemed to be coming out of his shell more and entering into things with a gayer spirit. He had seemed so terribly earnest when he had first come to live in their house, gauche and shy. Now he was more alert and a better companion in consequence. She wished, though, that he wouldn't stare at her so. She had told him about that. He would sit, saying nothing, just looking at her, which was very disconcerting. But he did not do that so much, now. Yes, he was a dear boy, but she wished that he had not bought her this necklace, because she really would feel uncomfortable wearing it, even in front of her neighbours. It offended her sense of rightness in dress, which she, herself, knew to be on a higher standard than her means

should have allowed. Anyhow, it was very very sweet of Martin, and she would write him a nice letter to-night. Meantime, she would put it in her bag.

Half an hour later she was being taken up in the lift to her office.

With one exception, the morning passed as all mornings. Meetings in Robin's office between Mr. Browning and Robin, with various of the staff being called in at intervals. Telephones ringing. The buzzer always at work when Carol was at her busiest on her typewriter. Callers. Cables to be sent. Cables received and decoded. The hectic atmosphere created by the preparations for Robin's trip to Constantinople penetrated even to young Jack, the office-boy. Even he became influenced by the necessity for speed in action and walked about doing his menial tasks with a quicker step.

The one exception to the daily routine took place shortly after her arrival in the office. She was just hanging up her coat on the hat-stand in the corner, when the buzzer rang. Robin had arrived before her! That, in itself, was an exception. She hastily took off her hat, patted her hair, picked up her note-book and pencil and passed through into Robin's office, to find him sitting in his chair, his back to the window.

"It's Carol's birthday," he said, "and she's late."

"No, Mr. Severn, it's only just half-past nine."

She saw, then, that he was smiling at her, so she smiled back, too.

"It is—really," she added.

"I came early to-day. I wanted to wish Carol a happy birthday before the rest of the staff arrived." Then he rose from his chair. "We always said that the office was to be Tom Tiddler's ground, didn't we? But we forgot to include birthdays in our rules, Carol." In a moment she found herself in his arms, his lips pressed softly to hers. "Darling," he whispered, "if I could wish you all the wishes in the world and give them all to you—I would. Why can't I buy you a

present for your birthday? Aren't you being a little ridiculous? I mean, birthdays weren't in the rules, either, were they?"

"No, Robin dear. Where could I say it had come from, anyway? No, dear, sweet Robin. I only want you. *There is* nothing else," she added, looking up into his eyes.

Robin stroked her hair gently as he held her to him.

"Little darling!" he said. "But I *have* thought of a little surprise for to-day!"

"Another surprise, Robin?"

"Yes, another surprise."

"Going to tell me?"

"No. Not now."

"But it's my birthday. Can't I know now?"

"No," and he pinched her ear playfully.

"When—then?"

"To-night."

"All right. Hadn't we better get to work now?"

"Want to?"

"No. Do you?"

"No."

"Funny, isn't it? In the office, too."

"Yes. Tom Tiddler's Ground."

"But we've been very good children, haven't we, Robin?"

"Damnably."

"I feel so wicked."

"So do I."

"You've cut your chin. How?"

"Shaving."

"Shall I make it better?"

"Do."

She reached up and kissed the small cut on Robin's chin.

"Better?"

"Much better."

"I ought to go?"

"Perhaps you should."

"All right—I'll go. Who gave you the buttonhole?"

"I bought it."

"I've never seen you wear a buttonhole before."

"No. But it's Carol's birthday."

"Did you buy it because of that?"

"Yes. I can't very well fly the flag at top-mast on the office building to-day, can I?"

"No. I suppose you can't."

"So I called in at the florist's on the way. Then it would remind me all day that this is a gala day, and I mustn't get cross."

"You never get cross."

"Well, I do sometimes."

"With me?"

He was pinching her ear playfully once more.

"I wish I could," he said.

"Robin?"

"Yes?"

"How did you know that I was called Carol? I always meant to ask."

"A little bird."

"My name's Mary Ellen, really."

"I prefer—Carol."

"But how did you know? It's my birthday. You must tell me."

"Well——" he began. "I am afraid I eavesdropped."

"That's wicked."

"I know. But when I heard Miss Jordan call you that, when my door wasn't properly closed one day, I had a curious thrill."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

"I did, too—when I knew you were called—Robin."

"Beloved!"

"Look, Robin—it's twenty to ten!"

"Run away, then."

"I can't. You're holding me."

Once more she felt the warmth of his lips upon hers and became aware of a vague smell of tobacco smoke about his clothes. In a moment she was back in her own room, her hair slightly disarranged, her breath coming quickly. Robin had really hurt just then. How strong his arms were! He did not seem to know his strength. "Dear Robin!" she sighed, sitting at her table and placing her mirror, thoughtfully, on the typewriter in front of her as she tidied her hair. A faint scent of tobacco smoke still hung about her. Robin's pipe. How he loved his pipe, which he smoked continuously in the office. And buying that buttonhole! Really, did ever a more divine man exist? Now, he had another surprise for her. He was always thinking out little surprises for her. They were to dine at the Savoy Hotel to-night, in the Grill. It would be quite all right, Robin had said. They had been working late and had business to do, and had slipped into the Savoy Grill on the way to a fictitious appointment, but she was to be sure to bring her shorthand note-book and place it prominently on the table. Robin thought of everything. To go about with Robin was to go about with a travelling encyclopædia. He knew everything. He knew all about food, too, and wines. His cigars smelt like some exotic drug, as she watched across the table, hungrily searching for his face through a haze of blue. She could do that in Soho, but in the Savoy Grill she must be more careful. The Savoy Grill! How often she had thought of the Savoy Hotel and longed to be taken there. Now she was going there to-night—with Robin! She gave a final pat to her hair and put back the mirror into her bag. Dear, sweet, darling Robin!

Someone passed her door. Robin's door opened. A conversation. Another footstep passing her door. Robin's door opening again. Now the buzzer. She picked up her note-book and pencil and walked through the communicating door.

"Miss Tibbit—bring in the Dorland file, please."

"Yes, Mr. Severn."

"It's lovely to be leaving the office together."

"Isn't it?"

"I hate all this hole-in-the-corner business."

"So do I, Robin."

"Why haven't we thought of this before?"

"I don't know."

"Just a little lie waiting on the lips to be told."

"Yes."

"You've got your note-book?"

"Yes."

"Darling!"

"Your hands are so strong, Robin."

"Yours are beautiful. Kiss me."

The taxi swayed. The lights flickered by. Madness. Complete and utter madness. Did anything matter? His body was close to hers, their lips together. What did anything matter? Robin was holding her so tightly that she could hardly breathe. The lights from the streets, the shops, the lamp standards, the passing vehicles, flashed by like a myriad stars in the heavens. Heaven! Was Heaven anything but this? She clutched at him desperately, her nails eating into his flesh, feeling an overwhelming desire to hurt him physically, to make him aware of the uncontrollable emotions which were surging through her shivering body like arrows. His flesh was firm and strong, and she held to him desperately, his mouth devouring her almost in his uncontrollable love. Dear, dear Robin! His mouth was so soft. And he was whispering things to her now, as his lips caressed her so softly that it sent shudders through her spine. "Darling, darling!" Oh—the divine closeness of Robin, whose hands were brushing against her breasts as they held her again and drew her closer to him. Breath seemed to leave her body, and she

became limp in his arms. "Darling, darling." Her nails now biting into his flesh, her head lying back in his arms, her eyes staring, her lips parted. Dear, dear Robin! The taxi jolting its way up Fleet Street, the driver in front with his greasy peaked cap oblivious to the drama being enacted behind his broad shoulders.

"Oh, Robin, I couldn't go on without you. Don't leave me—ever—will you?"

"No."

"I couldn't bear it. I just couldn't."

"Nor I."

A hand caressing her hair, soothing and quiet now. The lights outside growing brighter as the taxi came into the Strand.

"You're beautiful, Robin. Hold me till we arrive at the Savoy. Hold me very tight."

"I am."

"Squeeze all the breath out of me again, like you did just now. I'd like to die like that, Robin. Lying in your arms."

"My dear!"

"I can hear your heart beating. It's thumping against my ear."

"I can smell the scent of your hair."

"Dear, darling Robin. Your eyes look so happy to-night, too."

"They are, little sweetheart."

"Peeping down at me now, they seem so large and understanding. Yet there is a smile there, too. Why are you smiling, beloved?"

"Because I am doubly happy."

"How?"

"I'll tell you. I can't now. We're just there. Your hat? Oh——!" Again the feeling of his warm lips upon hers, her body relaxing again limply into his arms. "Come, sweet-

heart. We're just driving into the courtyard. Your hat? Note-book? Hell! Give me your hand. Hell! I love you. Understand that. God, how I love you! I can't tell you again till we leave the Grill. But I love you so that nothing else matters, not even my work. Understand that! Am I hurting your hand? Sorry. It's so small inside mine. But there it is. You and I belong, Carol. The rest of the world doesn't. Understand that, too. It's only you and I. The rest doesn't matter. We'll get it all settled one day. We'll get it sorted out. Here! The damned fellow's pulling up at the restaurant. Hey! Oh, we may as well get out here and walk through to the Grill, I suppose. Understand that, Carol. Nothing else matters," and he was helping her out of the taxi, into a sudden blaze of lights, and a strong arm was directing her through the swing-door; now through the hall.

"May I tidy myself?"

"Yes. In there! Down the stairs to the left! I'll meet you here. Here! Your note-book!"

"Oh—yes."

"I'll be waiting."

A band playing below, as she moved, as in a dream, into the cloakroom, along soft carpeted floors. Men in evening dress standing in groups. Laughter, music, the soft rustle of silk, the murmur of conversation. The glare of the lights in the cloakroom. Herself in the long mirror, her long blue coat like an Italian officer's, her soft felt hat lending softness, her new suede gloves lending orthodoxy. Her face flushed, her eyes seemingly on fire. Robin! Again the faint scent of tobacco smoke, the riotous thumping of her heart against her ribs. Was ever a man so divine as Robin—dear, sweet, darling Robin—who was waiting outside to take her in to dinner, a smile on his lips, his hair greying so beautifully at the temples, his eyes so blue that they reminded her of a summer sky. The other women in the cloakroom were obviously dining early, before going to the theatre. One had

just explained that fact to a new arrival. They wore most elegant clothes, and Carol realized that she was the only woman in the cloakroom wearing day clothes. But what did that matter? So was Robin. She noticed one woman looking at her shorthand note-book, lying in front of the mirror. She hastily picked it up and joined Robin outside. They went up a short flight of stairs, into the entrance hall again, then to the right, and, turning left, she found herself in the Grill Room. A large and beautiful room. A waiter came hurriedly forward.

"*Good* evening, Mr. Severn," he said, rubbing his hands delightedly. "For two? Any special table? In the corner? This way, sir."

In a moment she was sitting at a small round table in the extreme corner. Just to her right was a large sheet of glass, which seemed to form the wall at this side. She glanced through and saw the Savoy Theatre opposite, and long, shining motors driving noiselessly by, depositing people at the entrance to the restaurant.

"A cocktail, sir?" the waiter asked, becoming busy with the table.

Yes, they would have a cocktail. Other waiters came to their table, all of whom seemed to treat Robin as if he were an important guest. Their dinner was discussed at length, with questions shot from Robin as to whether she would prefer it cooked this way, or that. She really did not know but she answered his questions with assurance, and presently they were alone.

"And we'll put the shorthand note-book in front of you—there!" Robin said, placing it prominently to her right, with a smile.

"It's lovely here, Robin."

"You like it?"

She looked round the room once more, to find it almost empty. But there was a beautiful quietness. Save for the

vague sound of deep sounding horns, as motors turned into the courtyard on the other side of the large window, there was no noise. Waiters seemed just to stand. No one seemed to hurry. A few people passed to and fro. A waiter would direct new arrivals to a table. A little quiet fuss; then silence once more.

"I like it better here than anywhere we've been," she said. The wine waiter arrived and proffered a wine list.

"Your usual, sir?" he asked, and with a bow he departed.

"You come here a lot, Robin?"

"Yes—quite a lot. Ah—our cocktails! Thank you. Your health, beloved," he said, raising his glass when this waiter, too, had left them. "Our first drink together on your birthday."

"My love to you, Robin. And my gratitude."

"For what?"

"For being Robin."

His eyes seemed to light up even more. She felt the touch of his hand upon her idle one on the table.

"You look enchanting," he said, looking at her for a long time before raising the glass to his lips.

"You had a surprise for me."

"Oh—yes," and he replaced his glass on to the table. "Yes," he said again.

"Well?"

"It's funny. I feel quite diffident now."

"Why?"

"Well—I do."

"Is it *terribly* important?"

"Very—to me."

"Then tell me."

"Well—so far, Carol, you and I have never been more than—well, we've been very discreet, haven't we?"

Carol watched his obvious discomfort.

"Yes," she answered softly. "I know," and she twisted

her empty cocktail glass by its slender stem. "It's been difficult, Robin, hasn't it?"

"You've found that too!"

"But—of course."

"Beloved!"

Again the touch of his firm hand against hers.

"I'm going to Constantinople next week," she heard him say, as she watched the glass spinning slowly between her fingers, and Robin seemed to be speaking very quietly. "I'm staying in Paris for a day or so, on the way through. I've got to meet the Barauds, as you know. There'll be important conferences. I'll need a secretary there. Someone I can trust."

A silence now. He did not seem able to continue. Dear, darling Robin! Her heart was thumping so loudly against her striped silk blouse.

"You want me to come?" she asked, simply, looking up.

"I wondered. Would you?"

"—of course."

Silence again.

"I mean——"

"Of course," she said again, understandingly.

"But, darling, don't you *see*—you've never done this before! I know it. It just came to me, sitting at the table here. I can't ask you to come away with me like that. It doesn't seem fair. If there had been another man, but there hasn't."

"There hasn't been another man," she said, "because there was never a Robin."

He tried to speak. He changed his mind. Instead, he drew himself closer to her and held very tightly to her hand.

"I'm human, Robin. That's all. I can't help loving you as I do. I can't help that. I can't help wanting you so desperately when I'm lying awake at nights—thinking of you—imagining—dreaming. I can't help that."

"You'll come?"

"Darling—of course."

She felt herself smiling. Her cup of happiness seemed filled to the brim. He was looking at her so earnestly, now, and his blue eyes seemed to turn grey in their seriousness.

"You're wonderful," he said. "I just can't believe it."

"Why? Is it wrong to want to sleep with you?"

A waiter brought their melon. A spell seemed broken. More people had come into the Grill Room. Robin began eating his melon, very thoughtfully. How strange, she thought. He was so happy a moment ago. Now he seems serious. His laughing eyes are downcast, now. He is cutting his melon with a spoon, looking just as he does with his pen before deciding whether he should sign some important document before him on his desk. How funny men are! She had just told him that she wanted to make their love complete. She wanted to sleep with him and feel his slim naked body against hers, just as she had planned in her dreams for so long. It had to be. It had to happen one day. She had known that, vaguely, from the beginning. She found a new elation in her frank confession, which seemed to draw her even closer to him. He, on the other hand, seemed *distracted* suddenly, thoughtful, moody.

"What is it, Robin?" she asked, looking up at him.

He turned slowly.

"Carol, I'm wondering if I'm the most astonishing bounder, or whether I'm just an ordinary sort of swine. Don't you see, it's so unfair? You let me do nothing for you. You won't let me give you presents—money—clothes. I'm just here to take. I give nothing."

"Your love, Robin. There is nothing more you can give."

"Be reasonable, child! I'm rich. I've worked. I've made money. My wife is provided for. So are the two boys. I still go on making money. I want to spend it. How do I spend it? A new Rolls! There's talk of buying a yacht. I may build an extension to the place in the country. I do those things

mechanically. There's no joy in doing them. There's only one joy. That's you—and in doing things with you. And you won't let me share those things with you, Carol. I want to know the joy of your spending my money—*our* money—the money that you've helped me to make during the last two years. I want you to wear lovely clothes that we have bought together. I want our lives to belong to each other in those ways. You won't let me. And I take—take—take!”

“But, you darling, inconsistent Robin! How do you think I could explain those things away at home? What would Daddy or Mummy think? Or Martin Bowling? Or Joyce, his sister? Do you want *everyone* to know our secret?”

“I don't care what anyone thinks . . .”

“You do, Robin,” she said, smiling now as if speaking to a fractious child. “You do, darling. You mind awfully. That shorthand note-book. Look!”

She watched Robin's eyes glance to the book on her right, and she felt a new elation, a sudden sense of superiority which she felt over Robin for the first time in their association. It thrilled her to realize this. Perhaps it was having stripped things down to nakedness. There was nothing more they could talk about now. In less than a week she would be with him in Paris. . . .

“You're right,” he said. “I do mind, I suppose. Partly for you, partly for myself. Mainly, I suppose, because I do not want people ever to point their finger at you. The world is hard, Carol. Desperately hard. It loves to destroy. That is the world's attitude. I would hate people to point at you.”

“I should be proud, Robin,” she said.

“Then you are inconsistent, too.”

“No. My world is suburban. It's small. It's confined. People who sleep outside their marital beds, in Suburbia, are sinners, outcasts, the neighbours talk. It hurts those who are close to you,” she added.

Then, feeling that she should really start eating her melon, she picked up her spoon.

"It's fashionable in Mayfair!" he muttered.

Waiters were moving around their table. The room seemed to be filling up. People were now entering the theatre opposite. Cars drew up silently. A newspaper boy near the entrance to the theatre was shouting out his latest news, but no sound penetrated the stillness of the Savoy Grill. The melon was removed. Their fish arrived, served from a sizzling dish, with a flame burning beneath. A moving trolley. Waiters. Robin still sitting silently. The waiters now pouring wine on to the fish. It sizzled louder than ever, the flames licking the plated dish on its grill above. A waiter doing something to the fish with a fork. Would they never leave? In Mordoni's there was not this fuss. The waiter was cutting up the fish now, with a large plated knife like a small canoe paddle. Now it was being served. A plate was in front of her. The trolley had been wheeled away. Much bowing and fussing around her before leaving. Then silence again.

"This surely is my decision, anyway, Robin," she said. "If I prefer it this way, what have you to say against it? You ask me if I'll go with you to Paris? I tell you that I'll come. That's my answer. I am going only by the dictates of my own heart. A selfish longing to come, Robin. A madly selfish longing. But I bind you by no rules or regulations. 'I am married,' you said to me the first time you spoke to me of your love that day in your office. You could do nothing that might interfere, in the future, with your children, you said. You were married, but you did not live with your wife. You laid a clear proposition before me. I should, I suppose, have allowed you to sleep with me when I first accepted that proposition. 'Allowed!' That's funny, isn't it, Robin? It has never arisen between us until now. But that is what I should have done, I suppose, when I first accepted your rather matter-of-fact proposition. . . ."

"Was I so matter-of-fact?"

"A little. But that was as it should be. You never like morbid sentiment. Nor do I. I loved the way you told me, too. You could not have done it any other way, Robin. It would not have been you, if you had."

"I've wanted you desperately, Carol."

"And I, too. When I used to walk across the Common on my way home, I used to wonder at you. At your strength. And yet our love was so beautiful. It did not need that to make it perfect—really. But I knew that it must happen one day. It had to. And I used to feel glad, then, that I had kept myself for you. There might have been so many men, Robin. Men who were clumsy and sordid. Men who wanted only that. But you were different. And now that it is going to happen, you're wanting to buy me with—clothes, jewellery, money. . . ."

"No, Carol. Never that!"

"Well, isn't it, beloved? I don't want them. There's nothing now I want, but you. And that it should be in Paris! Oh, Robin! Will it be beautiful there now? I've always imagined Paris in spring. The boulevards, the gay cafés, the trees in the *Bois*. Will it be lovely there now, too, Robin?"

"There'll be lights in the shops," he said. "The windows filled with their Christmas toys. There'll be a freshness in the air. The restaurants will be gayer than ever. Montmartre will be filled with its night life—the coloured bands, the laughter of the people, the amazing joy of just being alive. The hotels will be full. It will be warm inside our own suite, there'll be a fire burning there always. From our balcony we shall see the traffic moving up and down the Champs Elysées, that amazing traffic that only Paris can know. We can stand there watching it together from our balcony before we go to bed."

"Yes."

She saw that his eyes were looking fixedly through the

plate glass window to her right, at the moving lights and panorama of the courtyard.

"Yes, darling," she repeated. "I have so often wondered where it would be."

"I'm sad—too," he said.

"Why, Robin?"

"I hate transitory things. Once you belong to me—like that—what do I do then, afterwards?"

How amazing, she thought. Always she had leant upon him before. Now he seemed to be relying upon her, looking to her for comfort, for aid, for guidance.

"We can go there again," she said simply. "We've all our lives before us."

"Yes."

"Besides, it isn't only *that*—with us. It's the glorious comfort of just being together. Like this," she added.

"Yes."

"But it happens so seldom, Robin," she said, after a pause. "I have so little of your life, really."

"I know," Robin answered, pausing too.

"Time! There is never time!"

"No."

"Our dinners together, and then I see a taxi carrying Robin away into the darkness, as I walk into Victoria Station."

"I know, beloved. In Paris it will be different."

"I long for that," she said.

Presently Carol said: "At first I couldn't talk to you, Robin. I felt unutterably shy. But you *make* me talk. You are the only one I can talk to now," she added.

"I am selfish enough to enjoy hearing you say that, Carol."

"But it's true. You seem to have brought something dormant from me. You make me think; you make my emotions find expression. I can describe them to you. They used to be hazy. You seem to have *educated* me," she added.

"Nonsense!"

"It's true, beloved," she replied thoughtfully. "I know that. My world is so small beside yours."

"Your world is mine, Carol," he said. "There *is* no other."

"It is beautiful to hear you say that, Robin."

"It is more beautiful to know that it is true," he answered.

"When do we go, Robin?" she asked, after sitting for a moment, looking at the tablecloth.

"Next Wednesday. I'm afraid that you'll have to allow me to buy you one thing, though," he said, back almost to his old mood, an eagerness creeping again into his words. "It's such a stupid little thing, but you can't mind *that*!" And he laughed aloud, throwing back his head.

"What, darling?"

"My wife always comes to the station to see me off when I'm going to be away for more than a week. It's a rule that she, herself, invented years ago. She always comes to the station to see me off. If the boys are home, they are brought religiously, too. Fortunately, they are at school, now. I think it would be a good idea if you wore a more drab-looking dress than the one you're wearing. You know, something like a governess wears."

"I don't know what they wear," she laughed. "Really, Robin!"

"Well, you know what I mean. Women have strange ideas about secretaries, especially if they travel with you to Paris."

"Perhaps they have reason," Carol said, looking away.

"No—darling—please! I know it's wrong to talk this way. But I just couldn't stand explanations—about you. You'll meet her on the station. She's sure to want to meet you. She rather enjoys talking to people, especially if they have any connection with my affairs."

"Jealous?"

"Heavens. No! She rather enjoys talking to my secretaries, that's all. She always has."

"As Robin's wife?"

"If you like."

Carol sat thoughtfully for a moment.

"I love you so much, Robin," she said, "that I'll even wear smoked glasses, if you want me to." And they both laughed, finding relief in their laughter. The waiter took away their plates; the grouse arrived. The wine waiter showed a bottle to Robin, who nodded, and the wine was uncorked. Heidsieck 1911, Carol noted, as it was placed in the ice bucket, after their glasses had been filled.

"And so you're making a governess of me," she laughed. "Really, Robin!"

"Well, there's no argument about that. You can't pay for my own evil piece of hoodwinking. That is quite out of the question."

"Very well. I'll ask Joyce Bowling to find me something from her shop. Suitable for a retiring matron of about—what . . .?"

"Forty-ish."

"Oh, what fun, Robin! But you'll be hating me before we reach Folkestone."

"There's no fear of that," he said, turning to glance behind him. He turned back quickly. "Remind me to get your passport in the morning," he said.

Now he was businesslike, just as he was in his office. "Remind me to get your passport in the morning!" Even his tone. Just as he rapped out his instructions in his oak-panelled room.

"See those people who've just come to that table?" he whispered, leaning nearer. "That's Foster and his wife. Don't look for a moment. Just behind me."

"What—Foster, the broker?"

"Yes."

Oh—so that was Foster. No wonder Robin was a little businesslike just then.

"Damn him," she whispered.

"I know. Awkward. Anyhow, let's hurry over dinner and get away. I want to get away."

"Why?"

He looked at her, smiling again.

"There are too many people here, Carol. I want you to myself. We can't sit here all the evening, anyway. What would you like to do? You said I was not to get seats for a play. It's your birthday. You choose."

"Well, Robin, what I'd like to do more than anything else in the world, is to call a taxi and go for a long, long drive. Could we do that?" she asked, looking up.

His eyes seemed to close for a moment.

"Of course!"

She felt the soft touch of his fingers on her knee beneath the table, and she felt her world swimming again, and her heart thumping wildly beneath her breast. She felt an overwhelming desire to throw discretion to the winds and to take him suddenly in her arms, and to hold him closely. What did the Fosters matter, sitting two tables away? Robin was sitting beside her, his hand resting on her knee. What did anything matter, now? She belonged to Robin. She belonged to him utterly, now.

But fifteen minutes later she preceded him discreetly from the Grill Room, her shorthand note-book prominently displayed, and she stood by, fingering the note-book a little obviously, whilst Robin paused to have a word with the Fosters. Then they left the Grill Room together and a commissionaire called a taxi.

A moment later they were being driven frantically along the Strand and out into a star-lit night.

VIII

“*A little bird sang up in a tree.
Heigho. Heigho.*”

“You seem happy, dear.”

“I am, Mums.”

“You were home late last night. Your father got quite anxious.”

“I was held up.”

“Would you like a kipper for your breakfast?”

“No, thank you. I’d love a glass of milk, though.”

“For your breakfast!”

“Yes, darling—for my breakfast!”

The smell of a kipper cooking came through her half-opened bedroom door. The same routine! Her mother at the kitchen stove; her father doing a small job upstairs. How odd, her world! She looked at herself in the mirror of her white-painted dressing table. . . . Yes, those were very pretty undies she was wearing, and she moved the mirror so that she could see the lower portion of her body. Yes, she had nice legs, so beautifully slim below the knee. She felt glad that her legs were beautiful to show to Robin. In so few days now, too. Next Wednesday! . . . How awful if her legs had been like poor Joyce Bowling’s. But then, I suppose Robin would never have loved me then, she thought. . . . She moved slowly in front of the glass, standing sideways, now. Her hips were beautifully formed, slim and graceful, making a sleek line. She had never studied her body before, but she found a strange fascination in standing there in front of the mirror, watching her lithe form clad in its scanty silk

underwear. And her hair? Yes, she was lucky in having hair that grew so naturally and always kept in place. When she had bent down to pull on her silk stockings just now, her hair had fallen over her head. She had only to give her head a shake, when she stood up, and it fell back into position. She only had to run a comb through it, and it looked as though she had come straight from the hairdressers. Robin had said that about her hair, too, the first evening they dined together. Yes, it was lovely to know that the lines of her body were pleasing, especially as it was now dedicated to Robin. Because of that, she found herself looking at it to-day as if it was some strange and holy thing—hallowed and sacred. It did not belong to her any more. It belonged to Robin.

“You can’t go out this cold morning with only a glass of milk, dear. Let me cook you a nice rasher.”

“No thank you, Mums. I’m not hungry.”

*“A little bird sang up in a tree,
Heigho. Heigho.”*

“Don’t you know any other song, dear?”

“Yes—but I rather like that one.”

“Your father wants to have a little music to-night. He’s asked Bert Freeman to bring his accordion.”

“Oh—of course, the party!”

“Be home early, dear, if you can. I expect there’ll be a lot to do before they come.”

“Yes, Mums—I will.”

Hang! Her suspender had broken. She hastily opened a drawer, threaded a needle and cotton, and sat sewing the fastener back on to the elastic. Yes, she had good legs, she thought. She sat on the end of the bed and stretched them out side by side, after the suspender had been mended. They were long, firm and beautifully straight. “Like a thorough-bred’s,” as Miss Jordan, in the office, had said at the last

swimming gala. And her flesh between the top of the stockings and the lace of her silk underclothes was white. It was soft, too, and well formed. How funny, she thought, that she should take such delight in her own body now. She opened the door of her wardrobe, and looked at herself in the long mirror, her arms encircling her breasts, as she stood with the pale morning sun catching the high lights in her hair. Yes. Robin must be pleased when he saw her. She thrilled at that thought. Dear, sweet, Robin. It would not be long now. Only five days till Wednesday!

"The James' won't come. Didn't I tell you they wouldn't?" her mother called, wheezily, from the kitchen. "Your father asked him yesterday afternoon. That young fellow's getting a bit too superior for my liking. And his wife behaving like a proper Miss Pert, too!"

"Why wouldn't they come, Mums?"

"Ask me another, dear! I don't know. A bit too superior for us, I suppose, now that he's got his new black coat and flowing hat. Never saw such a scarecrow! Strutting up the street like a peacock, of a morning!"

"Oh—well. We'll be a large party as it is. How many are the Bowlings asking?"

Her hair seemed to set beautifully to-day, too.

"An uncle of theirs," her mother answered, busy at the stove. "Then some young fellow who used to be Joyce's manager in Brown Brothers. I think that's all. Then we've asked the Potters, Bert Freeman and his sister. Your father wanted to ask Mr. George from the Reindeer, but I thought that wouldn't do with Martin's uncle being such a goody-goody."

"Is he?"

"Well, from what Mrs. Bowling told me, he's got the nature of a saint "

"Hello, Mother. Carol not down?"

"Just coming, Daddy."

Yes, she would wear that navy blue skirt and the striped blouse again. She took them from the wardrobe. She had worn that yesterday, too. . . .

"A fine time to come home, dear," her father called. "I got quite worried, you know."

"Never worry about me, Daddy. I can always take care of myself."

Ten minutes later, she was walking up the street with Martin Bowling, who was waiting in the passage, obviously for her. Damn! She had not worn the locket and chain. She hurriedly told him how much she liked it, but that it was *much* too good to wear to work. He seemed pleased about that and she found herself taking his arm, as they crossed the Common.

"Martin, isn't life fun?"

"Yes. Isn't it?"

"I don't know, but the mornings are so beautiful these days. The frosty clean air. The Common looking so fresh. Everybody sweet and kind. Isn't it thrilling, Martin?"

"Yes," and she felt Martin squeeze her arm against him, as they both walked to their work along the gravel path.

"I don't think I've ever been so happy, Martin."

"Nor have I."

"What long steps we're taking."

"Want to go slower?"

"No—rather not! This makes your blood tingle, doesn't it?"

"Rather I feel as fit as a fiddle."

"You look it, Martin."

"You're looking fine, too. Prettier than I've ever seen you."

"Thank you," she said. And then: "Do you *really* think I'm pretty?"

Martin stopped suddenly.

"Pretty," he said. "Why, of course, you're pretty. The prettiest girl *I've* seen, anyway."

"Well come along, Martin. We can't stop," and again she took his arm, as they strode laughingly along the gravel path. How funny to ask Martin that! Yet it gave her an added satisfaction. Her body was beautiful; she knew that now. But she found a new enjoyment in being told about it. She wondered, too, about its reaction on Martin.

At the end of the Common they parted, she a little breathlessly, he raising his bowler hat, which she noticed was a little small for him and not very becoming. She liked him better in the old felt hat, that he had worn since he first came to live in their house. But he was such a nice boy and she would hate to hurt his feelings by telling him.

"Well, we're having this party to-night," he said. "Don't be late home, will you?"

In a moment she was walking across to the Underground Station. She turned to see Martin jumping on to a tram, waving his bowler hat in her direction. She waved back, too. Then she passed into the station, showed her season ticket to the Inspector, and passed down to the platform. Twenty-five minutes later she was walking through the swing-door into Severn & Browning's, a happy smile and a word for those she passed, and into her room at the end, where she hung up her coat and hat, and combed her hair before walking into Robin's room and changing the date on his calendar to December 3rd.

*"A little bird sang up in a tree,
Heigho. Heigho."*

"Singing this morning?"

"Oh—I didn't hear you come in."

She turned, a little self-consciously, and helped Robin off with his coat.

"So my office has become a music-hall " he said, pretending to look very serious.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Severn. I didn't know that I was singing."

He gave a pat to her cheek, before walking over to his desk.

"Much mail?"

"I haven't looked yet."

"Well, here are two cables. Have them decoded right away."

"Yes, Mr. Severn," and she found herself taking the cables from him across his desk.

"Oh, by the way, get Mitchell of the Export Department to see about your passport."

"Yes, Mr. Severn."

If she wasn't mistaken, Robin had smiled happily as he said that. She closed the door then and went back into her own room. The telephone rang. People began passing down the corridor, Robin's door opening, voices in the next room. The daily round once more—the happy daily round. The typewriter clicking, the buzzer, the telephone, the rustle of paper as she put it in her machine. The interruptions, the buzzer again. The glimpses of Robin behind a haze of pipe smoke, men sitting round the front of his desk. A babble of voices. Mr. Browning, grey haired and stooping; Mr. Knox, keen eyed and pince-nez'd; Mr. Harrison, robust and pompous; Mr. Jeffries, mild and thoughtful. Her lunch with Miss Jordon at Slater's, hearing the gossip of the office, which now seemed so far removed from her world. The same faces at Slater's; even the same lunch. The walk back to the office, filling in the form for the passport, with Mr. Mitchell's help. The buzzer, the telephone, taking down a long report from Robin, with Mr. Browning sitting by suggesting an alteration to a word here and there. Typing the report. Young Jack bringing in her cup of tea and a biscuit before the report was finished. Robin putting his head

through the doorway, in his hat and coat, to say that he was leaving; he had to be at the Guildhall for the Banquet by seven-thirty. A perhaps more than formal "Good night." An inquiry about the passport form. His door closing. The report finally finished. Her hat and coat taken down from the hat-stand in the corner. A touch of powder. Then through the already emptying office, walking down Gracechurch Street. Into the Underground Station, buying some flowers at the florist's on the way, and an evening paper at the station. Across the Common, down Linden Terrace, putting the key in her door and closing it behind her.

Another day gone! A day nearer to Wednesday!

She wished that she could have seen Robin leaving for the banquet. Decorations were to be worn. A D.S.O. would now be pinned on to the lapel of his coat. How beautiful he must look in a tail coat! So tall, elegant and exquisite. But they had a party at home, too. She glanced in the front room. The table had been pushed to the side. Food was already heaped on to its white cloth. A ham, a pork pie, some stewed fruit, a blancmange, some sausage rolls on a plate, a fancy cake with icing, biscuits, a line of beer bottles, some glasses—many of which did not belong to them—a bottle of whisky, some siphons on the floor, two jugs of lemonade, a custard, some rock cakes, a large tea urn, which she recognized as the Potter's, a plate of sandwiches, a tired-looking salad. . . . Poor Mums! She must have had a busy day, she thought.

"Hello, dear. Fine spread, isn't it? Bert Freeman's bringing his accordion and we're going to have a little sing-song later on. Then Martin has fixed up a table for whist, upstairs in his place. He says the old lady won't mind, if we don't make too much noise. Fred Potter's bringing his shove-ha'penny board. . . ."

"It's going to be fun, isn't it, Daddy?"

"Oh, we'll make a party of it all right."

Fun! Had something happened to her? She found herself hating the smallness—the sordidness of it all. Their cheap little front room, with its Victorian furniture, the artificial flowers in a vase each side of the mantelpiece.

“I’ll just put these in water, Daddy,” she said, walking thoughtfully down the stairs to her own room, leaving her father re-arranging the food on the table. She took the white paper from the flowers, found a vase and filled it with water. Then she put the flowers on to the kitchen table and began arranging them in the vase. Suddenly, a feeling of sadness came over her. This little party, which her father had arranged with such enthusiasm, seemed so unimportant. It did not matter in the world of her own thoughts. It seemed so futile and meaningless, and she hated herself for feeling that way about it. But she could not help it. Robin’s entrance into the Guildhall, with the D.S.O. pinned to his breast, was so much more important, just then—his eyes shining, health radiating from his body. Last night they had been dining together in the Savoy Grill. To-night, dirty pans were lying in the kitchen sink, filled with greasy water. The kitchen still smelt of its cooking. Upstairs, her father was arranging sundry unappetizing dishes into a more symmetrical pattern on the side table.

She finished the flowers, carried them upstairs, and placed them on the mantelpiece, removing the two vases with their artificial chrysanthemums and taking them back with her to the kitchen. Then she went into her own room.

She undressed, putting on her dressing-gown, and then walked slowly up the stairs, carrying her sponge bag, to the lean-to bathroom. She lighted the geyser, and presently she lay in her hot bath. She heard her mother come out of her bedroom and talk with her father in the passage. She heard Martin return from work and remark upon the arrangement of the room. She heard Joyce arrive and run hurriedly up the stairs. These sounds came to her rather as a blind spec-

tator at a play in some theatre. It was all being enacted before her, but she did not belong to the world the other side of those footlights. Mere puppets, all of them. Flesh and blood, yes. But she did not belong there. She belonged to Robin. So did her body, which lay peacefully in the bath, her breasts firm and strong above the soothing water. Again she felt that strange elation that she had first known at the Savoy Grill, when she said to Robin, "Is it wrong to want to sleep with you?" . . . She placed her wet hands on her breasts as she lay back, thoughtful and still. The peace, the glorious peace of her mind now. What did it really matter if the paint on the glass roof of the lean-to bathroom was peeling off? What did it matter if the wash basin was coming away from the wall? Next Wednesday she would be in Paris. She and Robin would be in some beautiful suite overlooking the Champs Élysées. They would stand on the balcony before going to their bed, watching the traffic moving up and down, the myriad lights, the Arc de Triomphe to her right, the Place de la Concorde to her left. This was as Robin had said. Perhaps music from some gay café floating across to them as they stood there. What did it matter if the paint was chipping off so badly in their cast-iron bath, or that the linoleum was torn where her mother had caught a loose corner in the door? All that mattered now was Robin. There was a party at home tonight and she must go through with it by and by. She must leave the comfort of this bath in a few minutes and play this game of make-believe with her neighbours. Her father was so looking forward to this evening. Now he was calling.

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Hurry up, dear. We'll have people here before we know where we are."

"Just coming."

Slowly drying herself with a torn and damp towel. Watching the condensation of the steam on the white

painted glass of their converted conservatory. Trying to open the door without catching the torn corner of the linoleum, and making the tear worse. Running hurriedly down to her room. Standing naked before the mirror of her wardrobe. Realizing that she must hurry. Wondering what to wear. Shivering. Choosing the blue marocain dress with the red belt and handkerchief, which had to be tied loosely around her neck. Hearing her mother call.

“Just coming, Mums.”

Dressing hurriedly now. Someone had arrived. Adjusting the bright red belt to her dress and noticing, with a thrill, the curves of her breasts above the belt. Tying the red silk handkerchief round her neck. Powder. Running up the stairs. Remembering Martin's necklace half-way up, and running down again. Taking off the handkerchief. Opening her bag and taking out the necklace. Adjusting the clasp. Powder again. Then, with a pat to her hair, she was walking up the stairs again to meet Bert and Ethel Freeman.

She spoke politely, and admired the accordion which Bert had placed near the hat-stand. She asked Ethel about the children. Presently, she was speaking to Martin, whose eyes seemed to light up when he saw her wearing the necklace.

“It's lovely, Martin.”

“I'm glad you like it. It suits you, too.”

Her mother in a grey silk dress with black spots, a feather boa round her neck, powder laid on a little too thickly, so that her face was a mottled pink. Martin in his new striped suit. Joyce coming down the stairs in a green taffeta frock, with a large bow on her shoulder. Her father in a black suit, his heavy gold watch chain, with the football medal, much to the fore. A knock at the front door. Joyce introducing a funny little man, with a large black cravat.

“How do you do, Mr. Heavitree?”

“Mustn't grumble, Miss Tibbit, thank you.”

Another knocking. The Potters.

"How are you, Fred? Brought the shove-ha'penny board?"

"Yes, Walter. Got it here."

"Fine "

"Where's Uncle Henry?"

"He ought to be here any moment, Joyce."

"Fine spread you've got there, Walter."

"Ah—Mother's doing, Fred. Trust *her* "

"How's your mother keeping, Miss Bowling?"

"Oh, she's getting along, thank you, Mr. Potter. Finds the cold weather a bit trying, you know."

"I'll bring up the coffee," Carol said, feeling that she must get away.

"That's right, dear. It'll save your Mother's legs. We'll pour it into the urn right away and light the lamp. It's in the saucepan."

Carol walked slowly down the stairs to the kitchen, away from the noise and babble of the front room. They were laughing upstairs, now. She could hear Bert Freeman's voice above the rest. Another knock at the front door. That must be Martin's uncle, she thought. And in this strange motley of people, there seemed only Martin Bowling. He seemed to stand out above the rest. His voice did not grate on her nerves, as Bert Freeman's did. He had not the self-satisfied complacency of Fred Potter, with his tall white stiff double collar and his spats, and his safe job in the Bank. Martin had youth, too. He looked nice in his new striped suit. He was quietly attentive, and he had nice eyes. He was gradually assuming a poise, too, certainly noticeable since he had bought his new suit. She felt glad of Martin to-night. To face the jarring crowd of people upstairs without him would have been difficult. Yes, she would try to spend most of the evening with him. He, anyhow, was composed. He did not shout loudly, like Bert Freeman, and she could not

stand those jarring noises to-night. Last night had been a beautiful calm. Well, hardly a calm. But Robin's voice had sounded so beautiful when he had spoken to her of his love—dear, darling Robin, now sitting at the top table at the banquet. And she was standing by the kitchen stove, heating up the coffee in its saucepan and looking at the greasy pans in the kitchen sink. . . . She must go upstairs soon. Yes, she would find Martin and talk to him. No, she would not play whist. She hated whist. And Fred Potter would be sure to play, and he laughed so loudly when he won and made so many alibis when he lost. No, she would try to spend most of the evening with Martin.

"We've got a celebration, dear," she heard her father shout to her, above the noise in the front room. "A proper celebration, too. Bert Freeman's been appointed Second Brewer. What do you think of that, now?"

"Oh, I'm so glad, Mr. Freeman."

"Put the coffee here, dear. We'll keep it hot with the lamp."

"Yes, I'm pretty pleased, too, Carol," and Bert Freeman had his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat. "It'll make quite a difference all round, you know."

"Yes—I'm sure."

"Thinking of buying a little car, you know."

"Good. That'll be nice."

"Take us out for a spin now and again. Eh—Bert?"

"Yes, Walter. We'll have some spins now and again all right."

"Carol. Meet my uncle."

"Oh—how-do-you-do?"

"I've heard a great deal about you," a tall man said, bending solemnly over her hand.

"You're Uncle Henry?"

"Yes." . . . A rather thoughtful face, and kind, she noticed.

“Is anyone looking after you, Mr. Messenger? Everyone seems to be looking after themselves,” and Carol saw the scrimmage for food at the side-table, with her father carving the ham, her mother looking after the lamp of the Potters’ tea-urn, Fred Potter reaching across for a sandwich, Joyce standing with the funny little man with a black cravat, who stood holding a plate with a large portion of pork-pie beside a heap of salad. Mrs. Potter asking if there was any gin, and finding that none was on the table, thinking that a small whisky-and-soda might do just as well. Bert Freeman’s large frame pushing his way through to get a siphon for her from the floor; Joyce’s friend’s plate upset, when Bert Freeman’s head knocked against it in getting up with the siphon. Pork-pie and salad over the carpet. Everyone trying to help pick it up. And now Bert Freeman had trodden on a piece of pie-crust in his excitement. Carol cleaning up the mess herself and saying that it did not matter at all. Her father opening the beer bottles and drinking Bert Freeman’s health and success in his new position as Second Brewer. Indescribable noise and lack of space. Martin’s uncle asking if he could not take the debris away for her, and Martin taking the plate from her hand and carrying it away. Fred Potter reaching for another sandwich. Joyce putting another helping of pork-pie on to Mr. Heavitree’s plate and handing it to him. Mr. Heavitree getting well back into the corner to avoid a recurrence of the incident. Ethel Freeman eating a sausage roll with a fork, sitting with her plate on her lap, near the fireplace. Her mother toasting Bert Freeman with a glass of stout. Bert Freeman saying that it was good to see that they were drinking his firm’s beer. Martin talking to his uncle. Fred Potter asking her if she had tried those sandwiches, and hastily reaching for another one. Martin at her side, asking what she would like to eat. Arguing that she must eat something. Fred Potter recommending the sandwiches again. No, she would just have some coffee in a minute.

Bert Freeman shouting across the room to her father. Mr. Heavitree asking whether she would not "partake of a little refreshment." The pork-pie was quite delicious. . . . How ridiculous, this picture! How tawdry and insignificant! How far apart, their worlds! It just didn't exist, the lives of these people. Meaningless! What did they know of romantic things, like the Savoy Grill—and Robin? The touch of Robin's hand on her knee? The thrill of being held closely? What thrills had these people known? Fred Potter, there; what did he know of naked things, like sex? To think of it was hideous, utterly hideous. She closed her eyes.

"What's wrong, Carol? Feeling all right?"

"Just a little hot in here, Martin."

"I'll open the window."

"No."

"Come upstairs and see Mother by and by. It will be cooler up there."

"Yes. Let's do that."

"She'll love to see you."

"Let's go now."

"All right. I'll just put this plate down. How about your coffee?"

"When I come down."

"We're just going up to see Mother, Joyce," she heard Martin call across the room.

"Wouldn't she fancy a little something, Martin?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Tibbit. She's had her supper."

"Ask her if she'd like me to come up by-and-by for a little chat."

"I will, Mrs. Potter. That's nice of you."

The door closed, as Bert Freeman laughed again above the hubbub of the conversation. Someone was moving about in the James' front room as they passed.

"Funny the James' not coming."

"Well, Martin, people must please themselves, I suppose."

"Still, they might have come. They certainly do seem stand-offish."

Up the stairs to the Bowlings' back room, which seemed restful after the noise downstairs. Mrs. Bowling lying on her brass bedstead, looking tired and frail, her white hair drawn back. A gas-fire burning. The curtains drawn. Quiet conversation with Martin's mother. Yes, the party downstairs was quite a success. And Mrs. Potter would like to come up and see her presently. They were going to play whist in her front room, too. They hoped the noise would not keep her awake. And Martin's new suit was a great success. Frankly, no, she could not say that the bowler hat was *quite* such a success. Perhaps it was after seeing him so long in a felt one. Oh, no, it was quite a nice hat. She thought the other suited him better, that's all. Yes, she loved her necklace. It went so well with her dress. The blue of the stone matched her dress so beautifully. In fact, it seemed as if it would go well with anything. No, she did not wear it in the office. She did not like wearing jewellery in the office, anyway. Oh, yes, they were still very busy there. They would be working late until she left for Paris. Oh, hadn't she told them? Yes, she was going to Paris on Wednesday. Her chief, Mr. Severn, was going to Constantinople, and he had some very important conferences in Paris, on the way. She understood his ways so well. She handled most of the confidential matters for the Company, too, and it was important that Mr. Severn should have someone with him that he could trust. For how long, Martin? She did not know. Just a few days, she thought. A few days. . . . What? Oh, yes, it would be very interesting seeing Paris. No, she hadn't been there before. What did her mother say? Well, she hadn't told her yet. It was only arranged last night, you see. Oh, yes, a wonderful experience. Yes, she *was* lucky. She realized that. . . . Clothes? Oh, no, she wouldn't need a lot of new clothes. She was going there on business, you see. . . .

An accordion playing downstairs. Just a few chords. Now into melody. Voices singing.

"They certainly seem to be enjoying themselves downstairs, anyway," Mrs. Bowling said, lying quietly in her bed.

"Yes."

"How about getting down?" Martin asked, a moment later.

"Yes."

"Well, enjoy yourselves, dear. It certainly sounds a jolly affair downstairs. Tell your mother, Carol, that the mutton broth was very nice. I had it heated up for my supper."

"I'm so glad. Well—sleep well, Mrs. Bowling. I hope the noise won't disturb you."

"Good night, dear. No, I'll be all right."

Martin quietly closed the door.

"I've never seen your room, Martin. Show it me."

"Oh—yes, I've made it rather nice. Come in."

Martin switched on the light. Yes, he had made it quite nice, as he had said. A man's room now. She remembered that room so well. She had slept there as a child.

"Who's that?"

"Oh, that's Preston Daley."

"Oh, *that's* Preston Daley?"

"Yes. Taken a good many years ago. Still, he hasn't changed much."

"A nice face."

"Hasn't he? I'm lunching with him on Wednesday."

"Next Wednesday?"

"Yes. I made a mistake the last time. I went the wrong week."

"Oh."

Next Wednesday! . . . Five days. . . .

"A pity you can't come to lunch, too. I'd thought of asking him if I could bring you."

"Why?"

"Oh—I don't know. We're going to a restaurant this time. The Savoy."

"The Savoy!"

"Yes. I said I'd rather go to a restaurant than to his Club. I thought you might have taken longer over lunch, too. What a pity you've got to go to Paris, Carol."

"Yes——"

"The way that fellow makes you work!"

"Oh—no. I enjoy it."

"Well, we'll have to fix it up when you come back. You'll like Preston. He's different."

"How?"

There was a pause.

"He just is," he said.

She looked at Martin, who was standing, one foot on the fender, staring at the photograph on his shelf.

"How?" she asked, still looking at him.

"Oh—I don't know, Carol. He just is. I don't suppose you'd understand what I mean. . . ."

"I think I do, Martin," she said.

Silence again. Martin looking now at his foot on the edge of the fender. How funny, she thought. I know exactly what Martin feels. He feels it, too—this jarring note downstairs. Preston is like Robin. He would not understand this, either. The cheap wailing of the accordion coming to them up the staircase, the lusty accompaniment of the neighbours' voices, the cheap Victorian furniture in the front room, the strident laughter. But how curious that Martin should feel this as I do, she thought. She felt a sudden wave of sympathy between them. She wished that she had a brother like Martin. They could discuss things together, then—things like this. She could not with her parents. Robin had made her feel this way. In fact, he seemed to have spoilt her enjoyment for everything, save those things which she shared

with him. But Martin? How funny that he should suddenly feel this way, too.

"People like Preston Daley, Martin," she said, "live so easily, don't they? There's no fuss, no sordid background, no noise, no hurry. . . ."

"You feel that way?"

"Of course."

A pause.

"So do I, Carol." And then: "I envy that. I envy it enormously. I envy it even in—you."

"In me?" she laughed. "Martin, dear!"

"I do. You've got it, too—what Preston has. I can't explain it. But you've got it. You're different from all those people downstairs. You don't belong here, Carol."

"Martin!"

"You don't. You know you don't. I watched you downstairs. You were hating it. When you closed your eyes just now, I knew you were shutting it all away because you couldn't bear it. It jarred so. I watched you. I've watched you all the evening. A strange look in your eyes. A look that's different to-night, too. I haven't seen it before, but we've never had a party here till to-night. I've never seen you with all these people. But I saw it. I recognized it. You don't belong here, Carol!"

"Martin, dear—why do you speak like this?"

"I never thought I could," he said, looking away.

A different Martin Bowling. A rebel, like herself. His slim, sloping shoulders seemed so small compared to Robin's. Martin and she were the same height. Robin was so much taller; she had to tilt her chin to look into his eyes. She found her foot resting on the edge of the fender beside Martin's. She wished that he did not wear boots; shoes were so much more attractive. Her foot seemed so small beside Martin's, too. Robin had such beautiful feet. His shoes were long and narrow, and polished so that they

looked like a mirror. Martin's boots were heavy and solid. But there was, all the same, something strangely sweet about this boy on her left, standing beside her, looking at Preston Daley's photograph on the shelf, a simplicity that she enjoyed. He was developing, too. His intense earnestness had gone. In its place a gaiety, and, to-night, an unexpected outburst, which coincided with her own emotions.

"We're rebels, Martin," she said.

"Rebels! Yes, Carol, that's what I am. A rebel. I'm striving now. I didn't before. I used to drift, just like the rest. I was too content, like Peter Thomas and all the other men in my office. They don't seem to think about the things that I think about."

"What do you think about, Martin?"

"Well, dreams, if you like," he said, very quietly.

"Dreams?"

"Day-dreams. That's what Joyce calls them. Just day-dreams. Building castles. Imagining. Pretending."

"Pretending—what?"

Martin shrugged his shoulders again.

"Oh—things," he said.

"I dream, too," she said, after a pause, when Martin had stood looking fixedly at his boot on the fender.

"What do you dream about, Carol?"

"Oh—things, too," she said.

"Are they vague things?"

"No. Pretty definite."

"So are mine—really."

Silence, save for the sound of the accordion and the riotous singing below.

"Funny, talking like this."

"I don't know, Martin. It's nice to know that you feel as I do. We're just a couple of rebels, you see, and it's nice to share confidences."

"Yes."

She wished that she could tell him about Robin. If only he were really her brother! Then she could talk to him. It was difficult to keep this big secret inside, and share it with no one. She could enjoy sitting with Martin, now, and telling him the story of her love. There was no one else, she felt, who could understand. Martin would; she felt sure that Martin would.

"Do you ever lie in bed, Martin, planning things—beautiful things—in the quiet of the night? Do you ever pull the bedclothes round your head and shut out the rest of the world, and just lie building your castles?"

"Yes—I do—most nights," he said.

"So do I."

They stood silently before the mantelpiece. How strange, this boy. He seemed to have become a man—suddenly and unexpectedly. Was that because his mood coincided with her own, she wondered? She was a girl no longer. Next Wednesday she would become a woman! It was planned now; fate had decided that. There was no retreat. A few months ago, she could not have felt this same sympathy with Martin, for he could never have understood. Yet to-night they spoke of fundamental things in the same breath. If only she could tell him of Robin! If only she could be honest about Paris, too! She hated herself for acting this lie. Martin and she seemed alone in that house; the rest did not exist. A new sympathy had come to them to-night through looking at Preston's photograph on the mantelshelf. The boy was unsettled. His world was upside down, too. He wanted to break away. He wanted to rebel—he *was* rebelling. Should she tell him? Dare she tell him?

"I'm sorry you're going to Paris, Carol," he said, still looking at his loot.

Paris! He was sorry that she was going. Perhaps he would not understand, after all. No, perhaps he would not understand.

"Why?" she asked.

"It'll be dull here without you," he replied quietly.

Ah—he would miss her! Of course, they were rebels together! She would miss him, too, if he went away now. Especially to-night, with the party downstairs. How stupid of her not to realize that sooner!

"I'm glad you'll miss me, Martin," she said.

"Don't be away long, will you?"

How strangely soft his voice just then. A sympathy, a new and plaintive chord. She felt that she must comfort him, just as she had felt with Robin last night. She took his arm, instead.

"I'll write to you," she said. "I'll send you postcards of all the lovely things I see."

The door opened. Her mother was standing in the doorway, her face seemingly more mottled from the exertion of walking up the stairs. Carol withdrew her hand from Martin's arm.

"What are you doing in here, may I ask?"

"Oh—we just came up to see my mother, Mrs. Tibbit."

"Carol, is this the way to go on? In a young gentleman's bedroom, with the door closed?"

"Mums—really! We've only been here a moment."

"Moment! Best part of an hour you've been away and all the neighbours talking downstairs."

"We've been with my mother," Martin said, his face flushed, his slight body seeming to stiffen.

"Well, you both go back downstairs this very minute! A fine way to treat company, I must say! And, Martin, I'm surprised at you asking a young lady into your bedroom," she called after them, as they began walking down the stairs. "The door closed, and all! I'll be obliged if you'll not do that again with my daughter, young man. Not in *this* house!"

They walked down the stairs then, past the James' rooms.

Carol heard her mother open the door of Mrs. Bowling's bedroom.

"I apologize for that, Martin," she said, as Martin opened the door of the front room, and they rejoined the babble inside.

IX

“CAROL, WE’LL MEET TO-NIGHT. We must, before we go.”
“Yes, Mr. Severn.”

“There’s so much I want to say.”

“Yes.”

“Have you finished your shopping?”

“I’ve bought the governess frock, if that’s what you mean.”

“Good! What’s it like?” he asked eagerly.

“Well, Joyce Bowling says I look like a nursemaid.”

“Heavens!”

“But it isn’t so bad.”

“Good! I’m dying to see it.”

“You’ll see it on the platform to-morrow morning, Mr. Severn,” she said firmly.

Oh, how stupid to keep up this “Mr. Severn” business!

“Robin?”

“Yes?”

“It’s the second time I’ve called you that in the office.”

“Tom Tiddler’s Ground—but I love it.”

“I’m standing the other side of your desk, so I’m in my right square. As there’s so little post in, I don’t see why I shouldn’t talk to you. You gave me no letters last night, either. My book here is empty. Mayn’t I sit down?”

“My dear——”

“Thank you.”

“Now, let *me* organize for a change,” she said, sitting facing him. “I’ll open my book—the wicked book we took to the Savoy—so that if anyone comes in we’ll be all right.

We've cleared up all the work for your trip. Your slavish staff have all worked overtime, too. There's only been that one cable and we've dealt with that. There are two letters we'll have to answer before we go. Otherwise, do you realize, there's nothing important to do?"

Robin's eyes were twinkling.

"So I'm being organized," he said.

"Well, do you honestly expect me to be serious this morning? Besides, if you sit around here for the rest of the day you'll only be worried with routine matters, which Mr. Browning can easily deal with."

"I detect a note of mutiny in my secretary."

"Oh, Robin— isn't it fun?"

"Isn't it!" and Robin's eyes seemed to screw up with delight. "Go on organizing me," and he sat back in his chair, happily puffing at his pipe.

"Well, my idea is to make a half-holiday of to-day."

"I see."

"You've got shopping to do. So have I. Then we'll meet for tea."

"Oh—I see."

"And we'll talk and talk, and then you'll go home, and I'll go home, and then it won't seem so long till to-morrow. Now that's a good idea, Robin, isn't it?"

"A beautiful idea!"

"And then we'll both have an early bed and be fit and well for the morning."

"You've read the papers this morning?"

"No."

"Well, the Channel is going to be rough. What sort of a sailor are you?"

"Judged by the Isle of Wight, I'll pass."

Robin laughed heartily, his head thrown back.

"I think you'd better go to Constantinople instead of me," he said. "You'd wheedle the Pasha himself!"

"I don't want to wheedle the Pasha."

"I'd rather you didn't, too!" he said, leaning forward in his chair now. "Yes, let's make a half-day of it. Let's meet at the Savoy about four-thirty."

"Darling!"

"And I've a surprise for you."

"Another surprise?"

"Yes."

"Tell me now."

"No—at the Savoy."

"Very important?"

"Fairly."

"Must it wait?"

"You can't have *everything* your own way to-day, young lady!"

"All right. Four-thirty, then. What's the next thing?"

"Well, the situation remains unchanged, I'm afraid. I still love you very much. In fact, I think I love you more, if anything. There can be nothing that is of sufficient importance to report after that, can there?"

"No, I suppose not."

"And to-morrow, I expect, I'll love you even more. And so it will go on. A poor look-out for me, I'm afraid."

"Well, it will be worse for me. I'll have to come back when you go on to Constantinople and sit in my room next door with an awful aching void in here."

"What will you do?"

"Well, I'll arrive in the office at the same time each morning, even though you won't be here to scold me if I don't. And I'll go to my room through there. Then I'll take off my things. Perhaps I'll powder my nose. Then I'll take the cover off my typewriter. Then I'll come in here. . . ."

"And what will you do when you come in here?"

"Well, I'll open the door first and peep inside to see whether God has been kind and sent you home earlier."

Then, if He hasn't, I'll come up to your desk and pick up your calendar, and change the date. And when I do that I shall be thinking—that's a day nearer home."

"And then?"

"Well, I'll see if there are any cables—especially from you. And if you send any instructions, I shall be standing over the people concerned to see that they are carried out in double quick time."

"And then?"

"Well, I'll type my daily report to you. I shall make it terribly business-like."

"Why?"

"To make you hurry back."

"I see."

"Then, I'll enclose my own letter to you, each day. That'll be marked 'Private and Confidential.' The other will merely be marked 'Private.' "

"Yes?"

"And your letters to me—not the business ones—are to be marked 'For the attention of Miss Tibbit.' Then I'll know which one to open first."

"Oh—I see. Business will come second?"

"No, Robin will come first."

"I stand corrected!"

"And then, maybe, I'll come in here at odd times during the day and just stand. Looking round and remembering."

"What will you remember?"

"Well, Robin, always I shall remember the day when I stood in front of your desk, my legs shaking, my heart thumping, the day you first told me. Yes, I shall stand in front of your desk, I expect, and try to picture you sitting there. Maybe, I'll talk to you, as I am now, but I'll talk very quietly."

"I would run all the way home to hear you doing that," he said, leaning nearer across the desk.

"Yes, I shall have to talk to you, Robin," she said. "A month will be so long."

"It's Hell, isn't it? We're laughing to-day. We're talking beautiful nonsense. But that month, my dearest. It's a long time."

"Yes." And then:

"What will you do, Robin?"

A pause.

"I don't know," he said.

"I'd forgotten the other side of Paris, Robin. I've thought only of that—of Paris—and you. It's been almost too much to take in all at once. But the other side——"

"Yes."

"Couldn't I come to Constantinople, too, Robin?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You know best," she said slowly.

"I'm sorry—desperately sorry."

"Then, I'll have to come in and talk to you in here, if you can't take me."

"Yes."

Another pause.

"It's funny, Robin. I felt so happy just now."

"Yes."

"I feel as if I can't bear it—now. An awful feeling. A feeling of complete emptiness. I can't explain it."

"Yes. It's Hell, isn't it?"

"I wish you weren't going, Robin. Must you?"

"I must go—yes."

"Do you mind if I cry?"

"Darling—please!"

"I can't help it. It's childish, I know. I just can't bear it."

"Little Carol—please! You were going to organize me to-day. Now you're just demoralizing me."

"I'm sorry, Robin. It's childish. Terribly childish. Oh—"

why do I love you so?" She felt her head fall forward on to her arms, the tears trickling furiously down her cheeks. "Robin, Robin, why do I love you so?—Robin!"

It seemed so long that she was crying, and her sobs seemed quite uncontrolled. Then a silence, as presently the flow of tears slowly abated. How degrading, she thought, how terribly weak and degrading. In front of Robin. But she could not help it. It was so long, too, since she had cried. She must be tired. She must be overwrought. Could she look at Robin yet? What must he think? Dear, sweet, darling Robin, sitting so silently across the desk, whose wrist-watch she could hear ticking now. What must he think, he who was so strong? And in the office! People might be coming in at any moment. Robin must have thought of that, too. He had just left his desk and had turned the key in his own door. His hand was on her shoulder, now.

"Cry, little one," he said. "Cry for me, too."

Again her eyes filled with tears. Again she felt that overwhelming feeling of helplessness. But it did not matter, now. Robin had locked the door. There would be plenty of time to slip away before anyone came. She could sob now and no one would know, no one would hear. Only Robin, and he was standing by her side, his hand still on her shoulder.

"I've realized this parting," she heard him say. "I hoped that you wouldn't. But it has to be, beloved. The time will soon pass."

"Yes."

"I shall be thinking of you, too. I shall set my watch by the office clock before I go. Then I shall be able to picture you at all times of the day."

"Yes."

"I think we'll fix a special time each day to spend with our thoughts. A quarter of an hour every day. That time I can spend knowing that your thoughts are with me. That

time you can spend knowing that I am with you. It will help, dear Carol. A kind of telepathy. I think we should do that—always. We'll make it a rule for the rest of our lives. Then, if we are apart, we can always be together at that time, in our thoughts. We'll make it at seven o'clock. It's safe, then. We shall be able to keep that time. I shall be dressing for dinner. You will just be arriving home."

"Yes."

"For a quarter of an hour each day, we'll be together. We'll always do that, Carol. Always."

"Yes, Robin."

Silence. His hand was still on her shoulder as she dried her eyes. Could she look at him yet? Oh, God, the feeling of helplessness! Why—oh, why—must she feel like this? Was it the strength of their love that made this parting so poignant? Was it the feeling that this was the last time that she would see him sitting there, for so long, that brought that overwhelming lump into her throat?

"We'll do that always," he was saying again.

"Yes, Robin."

"The time will soon pass."

"Yes."

"And all our future is before us."

"Yes."

"Feel better?"

"Yes—thank you."

Silence. The ticking of the clock. The ticking of his wrist-watch on her shoulder. The sound of Robin breathing. She had better go now. Dear, sweet, darling Robin! He had not been angry at her childishness.

"Robin," she said, as she dried her eyes again. "I don't think we'll have tea together, after all."

"A little overwrought?"

"Yes."

"I understand. Go home early and rest. It'll be better for

you. Go home now. I can have my letters done by somebody else."

"I hate that."

"I prefer it, Carol. There's so little to do, anyway."

A silence.

"I think I will, Robin. I feel so ashamed, so stupidly overwrought."

"I understand. It was beautiful to see you cry, Carol. To know it was because of me."

She felt him by her side. She found her arm around his knees, as he stood by her chair, and she held to him tightly.

"Dear Robin!" she sighed. "Dear, sweet, darling Robin."

"I'd better give you this now," she heard him say. "Here it is, beloved."

She found his hand passing something into hers. She opened her fingers. She opened her tear-dimmed eyes. A gold wedding-ring. She examined it without speaking. What could she say? She could only hold to him more tightly and try to drive back her tears.

"I've had the date inscribed inside," he was saying. "December 8th, 1920, and then I've inscribed a long line. There's no other date."

"Why, Robin?"

"Because it's unending—our love."

"Yes. It's unending, Robin."

"We'll put it on your finger in the train, to-morrow."

"Yes, Robin."

"Go home now, my sweet."

"Yes, I'll go home now."

"We'll meet at the station to-morrow."

"Yes. Sit at your desk for a moment, will you?"

"Why?"

"I want to see you there again, just once before I go. Then I can always carry that picture with me while you're away."

She felt him leave her side. She heard him go to his side of the desk. She heard him sit in his chair.

"Thank you, Robin," she said, looking up for the first time. "I can't speak. But you understand, don't you?"

"Yes. I understand."

"I think I'll go now."

"Yes."

She rose from her chair, clutching the little gold ring tightly in her hand, and looked across the desk.

"Good-bye to our office times, dear Robin," she said.

"Good-bye till the train to-morrow, little Carol."

"Yes."

"And remember seven o'clock."

"Yes, Robin—always—I'll remember that time."

"It will help us, won't it?"

"Yes."

She looked across the desk once more at Robin's face, distorted now through the blurred vision of her eyes as she clenched the little gold ring more tightly in her hand. She turned away, suddenly, to hide her tear-stained face. Then she walked slowly to the communicating door.

"Good-bye, dear Robin," she said, turning back once more.

"Good-bye, beloved."

Then she opened the door.

"If you want to catch that train, you'd better get up."

"What time is it?"

"It's gone half-past eight. This is the second time I've called you."

"All right, Mums."

"I've got your breakfast half ready, and your father's written out the labels."

"Good! I'll be up in a minute."

Carol watched her mother return to the kitchen. Then she jumped out of bed and putting on her dressing-gown ran hurriedly through the kitchen and up the stairs to the lean-to bathroom.

The morning was frosty, and the pale morning sun was shining through the cracks in the white paint of the bathroom's sloping glass roof. Her father seemed to have mended the basin, where it had broken away from the wall; a large patch of newly laid plaster covered the right-hand side of the basin. A broom-handle, cut to the requisite length, was supporting the basin in position until the plaster dried. Carol glanced over the top of the bath, to notice that the torn linoleum had not yet been stuck down. She bathed hurriedly.

"Well, dear," her father said, as she hurried back through the kitchen to her room, a few minutes later. "No need to hurry. Plenty of time," and he replaced his gold watch in the pocket of his embroidered waistcoat.

The smell of a kipper cooking. Her mother at the stove, in her faded dressing-gown. The mended alarm clock ticking on the dresser. Her father's pants and vests hanging to air on a line over the stove. A kettle singing.

"Have you shown your father your passport, dear?" her mother called.

"No, Mums. Not yet. It's on the right-hand side of the dresser."

"Oh—I'd like to see *that*, Mother."

She looked critically at the new set of undies which she had bought, through Joyce, from Brown Brothers, and decided that her other best ones were really more attractive. She would wear those. Besides, I can buy better ones in Paris, she thought. Brown Brothers' Paris models were really made in Aldgate, anyway, Joyce had said.

"I must say the photograph isn't exactly flattering, dear," her father called through the door.

"No, Daddy. They never are."

"Wouldn't have recognized you, really."

"I hardly did myself."

"'Tisn't much of a photograph, Mother, is it?"

"Like those sticky-backs, Walter, we had done on the pier."

"Yes, so it is."

"Are you coming to the station too, Mums?" she called.

"Well, dear, I'd thought there wouldn't be time to get myself ready in, what with getting you off."

"Oh, yes, Mother, there's plenty of time," she heard her father say. "You'd better come. Martin's coming too," her father called to her.

"Good! How's he managing that?"

"Oh, he's lunching with that Mr. Daley, the man whose picture's on his mantelpiece. He's having extra time off for his lunch and thought he'd make an excuse to be away part of the morning, too."

"Good!"

"Quite a nice little send-off?"

"Yes. Fun!"

Now for the governess frock. She pulled it over her head and adjusted it, as it slipped over her hips. Well, it *was* a little Puritanical. But still, it could not look worse than the photograph in her passport, she thought, as she adjusted the collar. Now, what else had she to put on? Well, she might wear Martin's necklace. Yes, that was not a bad idea. Just the sort of thing to wear with a dress like this. She opened her drawer and took it from its small cardboard box in the corner, wrapped in its cotton-wool. The finishing touch! That was unkind, she thought, after she had laughed at the effect in the mirror. I should not laugh when Martin had been so kind. But this really *is* the sort of thing to wear with this dress, all the same. It is just the finishing touch. Martin would see her wearing the necklace, too, when he

came to the station, which would please him. Yes, the dress and the pendant went well together. She did her hair carefully and put her brushes and comb into the already half-packed suitcase. Then she folded her dressing-gown, and put that, with her slippers and sponge-bag, into the suitcase as well, having to sit on the case to make it close. She stood the suitcase on end, ready to be carried out, and she walked again into the kitchen.

"Well, dear, this time to-morrow you'll be parlez-vousing. Seems funny, don't it?"

"Yes."

"And you take jolly good care of those Froggies, too. They're liable to get a bit saucy, from what they say."

"I will, Daddy," she said smilingly, watching her father eating his kipper, a serviette suspended from his winged collar.

"And you'd better toddle along, Mother, and put your things on," he said, removing some fish-bones from his mouth. "We can't miss that train, you know."

"I don't think there's time, Walter."

"Well, you've had your breakfast, Mother! You've only got to put your things on. Besides, we must see her off properly. It isn't as though she's made the journey before."

"Do come, Mums."

"All right, dear," and her mother disappeared wheezily out of the room. "Are we going to have a cab?" she asked at the door.

"It's as quick by tube," he answered. "I'll carry the bag. Got your ticket?" he asked, when they were alone.

"No, Mr. Severn will have that at the station."

"It'll be quite nice making his acquaintance. Always wanted to meet him," her father said, removing more bones from his mouth. "Will his kids be there, too?"

"No. They're at school."

"Oh. Pity. I'd like to have seen his kids. His wife will be there, I suppose?"

"Yes. His wife will be there."

"Well, it'll make quite a nice little send-off. Will you be travelling first class?"

"I expect so." And then: "Mr. Severn usually works in the train, you see. He'll have all his papers with him."

"Well, that will be quite nice, won't it—travelling first class?"

"Yes."

A fish-bone seemed to have become firmly lodged in his teeth. He pulled at it fiercely.

"The worst of fish," he said, placing the bone on the side of his plate. "Too many bones."

"Yes."

"Well, you'll drop Mother and me a line as soon as you get there, won't you?"

"Of course, Daddy."

"And if you see any nice postcards—views and such-like—I'd very much like to have them. If there's one of your hotel, too, you might put a cross by the side of your room. It'll be nice for mother and me to know which room you're sleeping in."

"Yes."

Her father was eating his kipper with more care, now, avoiding the possibility of further trouble with the bones. He took a large gulp of tea, in between, to wash down any stray pieces, and he wiped his shaggy moustache with the back of his hand, after replacing the cup on to its saucer. "Yes," he said, "I'm very fond of views. Especially of foreign parts."

"I'll send you some, Daddy," she said.

"That's right. Always write on the back if there's anything to them. If you've been to the places, and such-like."

"I will."

"It'll make them quite interesting, later on. Mementos, like."

"Yes."

"You're not eating your ham."

"I don't feel hungry."

"Well, you must eat, you know. Got a long journey before you. Mustn't go on the sea with an empty stomach. Worst thing you can do."

"Is it?"

"Oh, yes. Always have a little something before going on a boat. Safer."

"I don't really feel hungry, Daddy."

"Well, you can surely eat a bit of ham. 'Tisn't filling, either. You wouldn't like to be sick in front of Mr. Severn, now, would you?"

"No. I don't think I should."

"Well, try and eat a bit. It's a nice piece of ham, too. Quite tasty. I had a bit for my supper last night."

"All right. I will."

"That's the idea. Always travel on a full stomach, when you can."

The alarm clock ticked on the dresser behind her. Through the top of the barred window, she saw the bottom of Fred Potter's spindly legs walking up the street. The black kettle on top of the stove was singing, as a small wisp of steam escaped in a leisurely stream from its spout and disappeared in the direction of her father's pants on the line above. The picture paper lay on her right, on the table, unopened.

"Well, you've got nice weather for it, dear, I must say," he said.

"Mr. Severn said the Channel might be rough."

"Oh—there's no knowing. Still, you've got a nice sunny morning. It might have been worse. Might have been raining, too."

"Yes."

Her father gave his moustache a final wipe with the back of his hand.

"Very tasty, that kipper," he said, and he leant back in his chair and began rolling a cigarette. "Nice cup of tea, too. This nippy weather makes you quite ready for your breakfast of a morning, don't it? See where I've mended the basin in the bathroom?"

"Yes—I did."

"Of course, I'll put a coat of distemper on the wall as soon as it's properly set. Thought of painting it cream."

"Yes. A good colour."

"Mother thought a nice blue mightn't be bad. Still, I always think a bathroom should be cream, or white."

"Yes."

"Cleaner."

"Yes."

"It'll be finished by the time you get back, too."

"How about the torn linoleum, though?"

"Well, that's a bit tricky. It's a stone floor, see? Can't nail it down. Seems to me I'll have to *stick* it down some way. I'm going to ask them at Walkin's, where I'm getting the distemper. They'll know the best way. Sure to."

"I've written the labels," he said, a moment later, having puffed laboriously at his untidy cigarette.

"Thank you."

"And you'd better have a strap put round your case, I think. That latch don't look too strong to me. I had a look at it when you were in the bath. I've got the strap all ready in the hall."

"You think of everything, Daddy."

"Well, that's the idea, isn't it? That's what men are for—to think of things. That's what Mother always says," and he laughed to himself, wagging his head from side to side.

"Ah—your mother's a great woman," he said, proudly.

"No flies on her. A proper old tartar, when she's angry. Usually right, though. The way she took on over that cauliflower with the boy from Perkins' yesterday. Cool! You should have seen her! The boy looked proper scared, too. Still, she was right," he said, thoughtfully. "The cauliflower was all stalk! Not fit to serve up. Not worth cooking, even."

"No?"

"Oh, yes, your mother's usually right. One of the old school. They're the real sort, too. Not many of 'em about now. When I first met her she was a fine figure of a woman. And beautiful? Why, she was the prettiest girl at the Tivoli in her time "

"Was she on the stage long, Daddy?"

"Till I married her," he said, puffing at his cigarette. "Light and dainty she was on her toes. You wouldn't think that, would you, seeing her to-day? Had all the boys on the end of a string, too," and she saw her father leaning back in his chair, the stray wisp of hair brushed across his forehead, a reflective expression in his eyes. "Then she married me," he added, smiling contentedly.

"You're very happy, Daddy, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes. Lot to be thankful for. Used to be a bit of a gay spark in my young days, I suppose. Stopped all that, though. Used to wear my moustache waxed at both ends, you know. A regular Tommy Atkins I looked round about the Boer War. Then Mother thought it didn't look fashionable, so I stopped waxing it." And he began examining the end of his cigarette, which had gone out. "Then I sort of settled down, one way and the other. And, of course, once Mother left the boards and settled down with me, I paid more attention to the business. Oh, yes," he added, "except for my business going west, I've had a lot to be thankful for," and he lighted his scraggy cigarette again.

"Did you love Mums terribly?" she asked, leaning suddenly across the table, her hand supporting her face.

“Oh—yes. Took a fancy to her the first time I set eyes on her. She was working with a conjuror then. Came on in tights and handed things to him. You know, the things he had to use in his act. He’d do a trick, see?—and Mother’d hand him the things to do it with. Maxillium, his name was. Made quite a name for himself afterwards,” he added, sitting back in his chair, his cigarette alight at last.

“But did you feel—then, Daddy—that nothing mattered—except her? Did you feel that the moment you saw her?”

“Oh—yes. The first time. As she came on from the wings carrying the Magic Hoop, I knew Milly Fawcett was for me. Said as much to my chum, at the time.”

She sat looking at her father across the table, her face still supported by her hands, as her elbows rested on the table. How odd, she thought. This kind little man, smoking so contentedly, a serviette still suspended from his winged collar below his wizened face, had felt the same emotion, the same overwhelming desires about her mother that she had felt about Robin the first time that she had walked to his side of the desk to bandage his finger—that Robin had felt, at that same glorious moment, about her. . . . Youth? Thank God, she was not delaying. The time was near now. In a moment they must be leaving for the station. The alarm clock behind her was ticking the moments loudly away.

“Yes, dear,” she heard him say, as he leant back and looked at the ceiling. “I was a cuckoo on your mother, from the start. A kind of telepathy, if you like. She always says she saw me sitting down in the stalls at the first house along with Charlie Higgins, that Monday night. Took a fancy to me right away. She picked me out because I was clapping so loud.”

Cuckoo!

“Of course, Mother don’t like to be reminded of those days too much. None of the neighbours know she was Milly Fawcett, either. Not that it would matter, of course.

Some of the girls along with her at that time married into the aristocracy, you know. Of course, she only married me. But I had my own business, then. It was a respectable trade—Almonds.”

“Yes.”

“But it’s funny, how these things get you. It’ll come to you one day—p’r’aps,” he said. “Some nice young fellow who’s got a little business of his own. And you’ll feel you want to get married, too, like Mother and me did. You’ll know right away,” he added, smiling at her affectionately through his gold-rimmed spectacles.

She felt she must get away. She felt an overwhelming desire to rush from the room, the house, the street. To get away. To stay away. To be with Robin. To be with Robin always. *Cuckoo!* A nice little business. . . . Linden Terrace. . . . Bert Freeman. . . . The party.

“But,” she heard her father say, as he leant across the table, “I hope that won’t happen for many a year yet, dear. Too precious,” he said, touching her hand unexpectedly. “Much too precious. Couldn’t do without you, you know. Mother couldn’t, either. You mean a lot to us. Our lives are closing now, as yours is only beginning. Stay with us as long as you can, Carol. It gets lonely here sometimes. Except for Martin upstairs, there ain’t many to talk to now, to spend time with. It isn’t like it used to be. I often sit waiting for you to come home of an evening, just to hear what’s happening up in the City, for there’s only Mother and me during the day. I’ll miss you a lot when you’ve gone, you know. Of course, it’ll be a wonderful experience. Doesn’t come to many girls to be taken first class to Paris and have all expenses paid at the best hotels, too. ’Tisn’t many girls who’ve had a chance like that. Still, you mustn’t mind if I get a little upset now and again, dear. It’ll be lonely when you’ve gone.”

Carol glanced up to see that, behind those gold-rimmed

glasses, her father's eyes were moist and she opened her hand and gripped his tightly.

"Darling Daddy," she said, "I'll miss you, too."

She rose quickly from the table then, and left the room, for her eyes, too, were not dry. A moment ago she had been despising her surroundings, despising, even, her father—his untidy appearance, his crudities. But he loved her. Not as Robin did. A sweet and kindly love. A lonely little man, clinging so desperately to the things that belonged to the remnants of his life, longing so intensely for companionship and affection.

"Anyhow, it'll be quite a nice send-off, dear," she heard him calling, cheerfully, through her half-opened door as she put on her coat.

"Yes, Daddy."

"Ah—Mother! We'll just time it nicely. Carol's putting on her things. I'll roll another cigarette and we'll toddle along."

In a moment they were walking up Linden Terrace, her father carrying the *papier-mâché* suitcase, with the strap fixed firmly round its middle, her mother walking by his side, in her violet coat, with her feather boa, a hat with a bunch of artificial cherries at the front. She took her mother's arm as she walked. Ethel Freeman waved from the front-room window as they passed. Ten minutes later they were in the Underground train, bound for Victoria.

"Well, I suppose we'd better get some platform tickets, Mother," her father said, walking up the stairs at Victoria Station, twenty minutes later. "I'll see to it all. You and Carol walk down to the barrier. I'll meet you there. No need to hurry. Plenty of time. Leave it all to me."

Carol walked with her mother, whose asthma seemed more pronounced this morning, and they waited at the barrier, as she glanced frantically around for Robin. The platform was crowded, especially this side of the barrier.

People were pushing their way to get nearer to the opening, presently to pass through in a steady stream, with their passports and their tickets. Her father returned, with the platform tickets, the suitcase, and some newspapers.

"Found Mr. Severn?"

"No. I don't think he's arrived yet."

"Well, I've got another platform ticket, so that you can get through the barrier. Trust your old Dad to think of everything!" and he grinned cheerfully, his old bowler hat so far at the back of his head, that it made his ears stand out. "Follow me, Mother. No need to hurry. Plenty of time. Not that you'd think that by the way people seem to push. Thank you, sir! That was my toe. No, quite all right. No need to push, though. There's plenty of time. Got my corn, Mother, that fellow did. Still, he couldn't help it, I suppose. Ah—there's someone waving over there, Carol."

"Where?"

"Near the barrier."

"Oh—that's Mr. Jeffries. Hello, Mr. Jeffries. Have you come to see us off?" she called, happily.

Mr. Jeffries leant over the barrier.

"I've got your ticket. Mr. Severn's on the platform."

"Here, what's this?" the Inspector called, full of self-importance.

Explanations followed, and the ticket was passed over, and they were allowed eventually through to the platform.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Jeffries," her father said, as he strode up the platform, carrying the suitcase. "Seems a nice lot of fellows you've got working in your business, from all accounts." And Carol was walking ahead with her mother, her eyes searching the crowded platform.

"Any more fellows from the office coming down, Mr. Jeffries?" she heard her father ask, behind her.

"One or two. Always things to be settled at the last moment when Mr. Severn goes away."

"Well, it'll make quite a nice little send-off, won't it? Ever been to Paris?"

Ah—there he was! Standing near the carriage door, talking to Mr. Browning, a tall and elegantly dressed woman by his side. Robin was in a brown tweed travelling coat and a soft hat and she had never seen him dressed like this before. It made him look even more distinguished, more carefree, more boyish.

"Good morning, Miss Tibbit," he said, raising his soft felt hat. "In good time, I see," and he smiled charmingly.

"Good morning, Miss Tibbit," Mr. Browning said, raising his bowler hat. "You've got a splendid day for the crossing. Good morning," he said, raising his hat again, as he saw her mother and father.

"Mr. Severn?" her father exclaimed, excitedly. "Well, I'm glad to meet you, I'm sure. Just a moment! I'll put the bag down. How *are* you?" he asked, shaking Robin's hand warmly and looking smilingly up into his bronzed face. "And you, Madam?" he said, raising his drooping bowler. "A pleasure, I'm sure."

"So you're Miss Tibbit," Robin's wife said, looking at her a little critically.

"Yes."

"You're going to have a busy time."

"I expect so. I hope so. You see, I haven't been to Paris before, and I don't speak French, and, of course, Mr. Severn—he speaks French so beautifully, and I've always regretted that I didn't work harder at French when I was at school. I mean, it would be such a help to Mr. Severn if I spoke French, when there will be all those meetings with Baraud's. It's going to be a little difficult, I expect. . . ."

Steady! Why are you talking like that? Why is the blood rushing to your cheeks? Why can't you control yourself? You're floundering, Carol, that's what you're doing. You're floundering. Robin is watching you out of the corner of his

eye. You saw that just now, didn't you? Don't lose control of yourself. Robin loves you. Robin has a standard. His wife is looking down at you. Her eyes are cold. She thinks you're just drab. Just as you did, half an hour ago, about your own father. That's because you're wearing the little governess frock. You're overwhelmed by the elegance of her clothes, the warm sables, the delicate scent of richness. That's what it is. It isn't because of her. Robin loves *you*. He doesn't love her. You're the one to feel proud. Don't flounder, Carol. Robin is watching you out of the corner of his eye. . . .

Mrs. Severn was dabbing the end of her nose with a small lace handkerchief.

"Yes," she said. "I expect you'll miss a great deal through not speaking the language."

Was this antagonism? Open antagonism? Mrs. Severn was looking towards her father and mother, her eyes screwed up as if trying to look far into the distance.

"Are those your parents over there?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Where do you live?"

"Clapham Common."

"Oh, yes. I think I've passed through there on my way to Ranelagh," she said.

"Not to Ranelagh. That's Barnes!"

"Oh—Barnes Common, is it? I really don't know much about those places," she said, and drew her sables more tightly round her shoulders, and looked again at the Tibbits with a slightly puzzled expression.

"Some fine carriages on this train," she heard her father saying to Robin. "Makes travelling a pleasure, don't it, Mr. Severn, these Pullmans? Not like it used to be in the old days—eh? Of course, in my dad's time they weren't no better than cattle trucks. No modern conveniences on the train, either."

Mr. Jeffries was still talking to her mother. Mrs. Severn

was still looking at her parents. Mr. Browning interrupted her father's conversation on trains, to whisper some confidential matter into Robin's ear. People were moving to and fro, porters were wheeling and carrying luggage, doors were opening and slamming, newsboys were shouting out their wares; others were selling chocolates and cigarettes. Steam seemed to be escaping from underneath their carriage. Then Martin was squeezing her arm, wearing his new overcoat and his old felt hat, which seemed to smell a little of benzine.

"Hello, Carol."

"Hello, Martin. How nice of you to come!"

"Ah—Martin! Come and meet Mr. Severn. This is Mr. Bowling, a neighbour of ours, sir. In the Insurance business. Doing very nicely, too."

"How-do-you-do! Haven't I heard of you?" and Robin was smiling in a way that seemed to belong only to him. "Aren't you going to do some of our business, one day?" he asked.

Darling Robin! Always the right word. She had seen him look up the financial standing of the Atlantic Company, when she had first mentioned the matter to him. But he had remembered. Would the train never leave, so that she could be alone with him, away from this crowded platform?

"I'm sure, sir, that I hope we get the chance to quote when the policies fall due," Martin replied.

"Yes, they do get up these carriages very nice, I must say," her mother was saying to Mr. Jeffries. "Like Mr. Tibbit said, it makes it quite a pleasure to travel now, doesn't it?"

"Oh, Jeffries."

"Yes, sir," and Mr. Jeffries ran over and was being given hurried instructions by Robin.

"I've brought you this book," Martin was saying, pressing it into her hand.

"How sweet of you, Martin."

A whistle blew. People now seemed to be getting into the train.

"It's too cold standing about on this platform, Robin," Mrs. Severn said. "I think I'll get along!"

"Oh—just a moment, Beryl."

A hurried termination of Robin's instructions to Mr. Jeffries, as he walked over to his wife.

"Take care of the boys," Robin said, kissing her on each cheek. "Tell them how sorry I am that I shan't be back when they break up."

"Yes, I will. I hope you don't get too bored," she added. "Anyhow, make the best of it. Are you staying, Harry?" she asked Mr. Browning.

"I'll come with you," he said. "Well, Robin. Good luck. Sorry you're landed with this trip," and the two partners shook hands.

"Thanks, Harry. I'll cable you directly after the Baraud Meeting."

"Yes. I'll be interested. Good-bye, old fellow. Good-bye, Miss Tibbit."

"Good-bye, Mr. Browning."

Mr. Browning raised his hat, and he raised it again to her mother. Mrs. Severn smiled faintly, and, with a bow, she passed down the platform with Mr. Browning, her head erect, her magnificent furs wrapped around her.

"I'd better get that cable off right away, sir?"

"Yes, Jeffries. Send it from the station, here."

"Right, sir. Good-bye, Miss Tibbit."

"Good-bye, Mr. Jeffries."

Whistles were blowing again. Mr. Jeffries raised his hat, and, walking hurriedly away, became lost on the crowded platform.

"I hope you like the book, Carol."

"I shall, Martin. I adore Galsworthy."

"Miss Tibbit, we should really get into the train, you know. The porters seem a little anxious."

Did ever a man smile so beautifully as Robin? And

he had remembered to say an encouraging word to Martin.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Tibbit. It's been a great pleasure meeting you like this."

"Oh—thank you, Mr. Severn. A pleasure, I'm sure," and her mother was shaking Robin's hand, a little flustered, the cherries on her hat moving excitedly on the brim.

"And you, Mr. Tibbit."

"Thank you, Mr. Severn. A real pleasure, our little chat, you know. Hope to have another, one of these days."

"Yes. Good-bye, Mr. Bowling. Come and see me before Lady Day. I think our fire policies fall due then."

"Thank you, sir."

"And now, if we don't get in—we'll lose our train, Miss Tibbit."

Oh, that divine smile of Robin's! And now the whistles were blowing louder than ever, and doors were slamming. The guard had his green flag raised.

"Good-bye, Mums darling."

"Good-bye, dear."

"Good-bye, Daddy."

"Good-bye, dear. Take care of yourself. If you come over queer on the boat, just pop one of these in your mouth and suck it. Best thing if you're feeling queer."

"Thank you, darling. Good-bye, Martin."

"Good-bye, Carol."

"Hurry!"

"Coming."

"Careful there, miss."

"Just made it."

Laughter. A strong arm behind hers drawing her into the carriage. Robin's arm. The train already moving. The door closing. Her mother, father and Martin waving on the platform. Her father's bowler hat waving in his hand. The end of these long five days. . . .

"Don't forget to send us those postcards, will you?" her father shouted, using his hands as a megaphone.

Their carriage was too far out of the platform, now, to answer his call, but she waved through the open window, her father's small bag of acid drops in her other hand. The train went over the points and turned round the bend, but she was able to catch one more fleeting glimpse of her little family and Martin, as they stood on the end of the platform, her father's bowler hat waving more furiously than ever. Then she could see no more.

"Beloved," a voice whispered behind her.

In a moment, the train had passed the signal-box and the window had closed.

X

PRESTON DALEY SAT IN a leather arm-chair beside the fireplace in the smoking-room of the Porchester Club, looking through some letters which the hall porter had handed to him as he entered the Club a few minutes earlier. After sitting for some time with his feet on the fender seat, he looked up to see Sir James Briercroft walking towards him.

"Good morning, Sir James," he said, removing his suède shoes from the seat. "You're looking well."

"Feel it, too, my boy. Plenty of work. The finest tonic of all. Reading your love letters?"

"No. Mostly bills, I'm afraid."

"Well, have a drink?"

"Thank you. I'll have a dry Martini."

Briercroft pressed a bell at the side of the fireplace.

"Are you coming to our show to-morrow night?" he asked.

"I'm afraid Charity Balls aren't much in my line, Sir James. Still, I've bought a couple of tickets."

"Good! We'll take your money, anyway—even if you can't come."

"It really is amazing, the way people allow themselves to be fleeced in the name of Charity," Preston said. "Isn't it? They'll gladly pay a couple of guineas for an appalling dinner and cabaret. Charge them half that amount, in the ordinary way, and they'll raise merry Hell."

"True. Still, the Hospitals must raise money somehow, my boy. It's becoming a bigger problem every day. Oh—a dry Martini and a brown sherry, Tomkins."

A club waiter bowed and walked back flat-footedly towards the door at the end of the room. Briercroft sat on the fender seat, his back to the fire, running his lean and capable fingers across his bald head. Then he drew them thoughtfully across his face, pausing at his chin. "Yes," he said, "it's becoming a bigger problem every day, my boy."

"Well, judging by the rate they're putting these Charity affairs on, the Hospitals should soon be paying dividends," Preston laughed.

"I wish it were as easy," Briercroft said.

Preston tidied the correspondence on his lap, and put it away into his inside pocket.

"My father is doing something for St. Saviour's, at the moment, isn't he?" he asked.

"Yes. He's helping us to build the new wing. He's offered to put down ten thousand if a similar amount is subscribed elsewhere. Considering all he has done for the Hospital already, I think it's thundering good of him. A few more like your father, my boy, and our job would be easier."

"Well, you've got my four guineas for to-morrow night's little prank to go on with," Preston laughed.

"Good," Briercroft smiled. "Doing anything for lunch?"

"I'm afraid I am."

"A pity," Briercroft said. "I've got rather a remarkable fellow lunching here. Only in his early thirties. He's spent some time on the Gold Coast, doing some rather interesting malarial research. He read a paper before the Royal Society the other night. Caused quite a stir."

"I wish I could join you," Preston said.

"I've got Stirling lunching, too. There's some debate on in the House in a day or so and he wanted to get some first-hand information, beforehand. That's why I've fixed this lunch. Just thought that the boredom of lunching with two old fogies, both picking his brain over a cutlet, might have been relieved by some younger element."

"Well, all I know of malaria," Preston said, opening his cigarette-case and taking out a cigarette, "is that I had it in the war and it isn't a thing I care much about. Besides," he added, "if I were some young medical chap, I'm sure I'd much prefer being entertained by a Cabinet Minister and a distinguished surgeon—*à trois*—without having to listen to the idle prattlings of a chap like myself."

"Yes, you're a lazy young devil, Preston," Briercroft said. And then: "What *do* you do with your time?"

Preston lighted his cigarette.

"Well," he said. "I've got some horses in training, Sir James. I've got a gun in two shoots. I'm buying a boat, which Nicholson's are building and that means running down to Southampton every now and then. I don't know," he said, throwing a match into the fire, "the time goes quickly enough."

"Not forgetting beating up the town each night?"

"That's a bit hard, sir," Preston laughed.

"I'm told that you're the *débutantes'* delight. Mothers keep most watchful eyes on their daughters when you are around."

"Untrue, sir!"

"A veritable Don Juan, they say."

"I've explained, sir. I'm a regular contributor to every Charity Ball."

"And every Night Club."

"Well, I suppose it's all good for trade," Preston laughed again, inhaling his cigarette.

"And you can't join a serious lunch-party. Who is the beautiful woman to-day?"

"Well, frankly, you misjudge me," Preston said. "I've got a man lunching with me. I own that I completely forgot the last time I asked him and the poor devil came here and waited over an hour, and then had to leave with an empty stomach. I own that. Still, I've remembered to-day, and I'm

taking him to lunch at the Savoy. I've even fallen in with his wishes as to the place we're to lunch at."

"If you were my son," Briercroft said, "I expect I'd send you out to the Gold Coast, like my young Scottish friend. Do you the world of good, my boy. The world of good." And Briercroft chuckled to himself. "Ah—thank you," he said, taking his sherry. "Here's luck."

Preston reached up and took his dry Martini from the tray and Tomkins disappeared once more.

"Good luck, sir," he said, and swallowed his cocktail in one gulp.

"I should hate to have to operate on your inside," Briercroft said, watching him.

"I hope, sir, that you never will," Preston laughed.

"How many of those do you drink in one day?"

"Really——"

"You'd better come back with me. I'll show you some photographs of what happens to people's insides after they've poured that muck down it for a year, or so."

"I'd rather not know," Preston laughed. And then: "Though, seriously, sir, I should like to come and see you operate some time."

"It would make you sign the pledge."

"Heaven forbid. But seriously, I would like to do that, Sir James. Are you operating to-day?"

"When I am operating in the afternoon, my boy, you do not see me in the Club," he said. "No, to-day, I am lecturing. On the days I lecture, I may drop in here for lunch and indulge in my two vices—brown sherry and old brandy. If you would join me for lunch to-day, you would see me enjoy both."

"Well, I can't let this fellow down again," Preston said.

"At least, not very well. Although I *could* telephone him, I suppose," he mused, "if I could only remember his address."

"Where does he live?"

"It isn't so much where he lives, it's where he works. Some insurance business."

"Well, please yourself, my boy," Briercroft said, sipping his sherry. "If it's important, I shouldn't worry. If it's not, why not put him off?"

"Oh, it's not important," Preston answered, getting up from his chair and placing his empty glass on the shelf. "It's only some fellow I knew in the war. Nobody important. I have a letter from him somewhere, informing me that I'd skipped his lunch. Oh, no," he remembered, "I destroyed it. Now, if I can only think of the name of his company, I'll put a call through. I'll just go and find out."

"Right," Briercroft answered, looking at him amusedly from the fender seat, "but I bet it's a woman all the same."

"I wish it were," Preston laughed, and walked from the smoking-room into the Hall.

When Preston Daley was in any difficulty, he had one infallible rule: he telephoned Miss Simkin, his father's secretary. She was a reliable source of information, and she also carried out his various errands. She bought his theatre tickets; she bought his rail and boat tickets. Apart from choosing his suits, ties and other more personal items, Miss Simkin seemed to play a large part in Preston's other activities. Her office telephone was used far more than his father was aware by Preston ringing up to know such trivial matters as how to spell a word, it never seeming to occur to him to look it up in a dictionary. He would just put down his pen, in the middle of a letter, and go to the telephone. "How do you spell 'extraordinary,' Miss Simkin? With an 'e' or an 'a' at the end? An 'a'. Thank you. No, nothing else," and he would replace the receiver and go back happily to his letter. Hardly a day passed, when Preston was in London, without telephoning Miss Simkin. Any problem that arose during the course of the day resulted in his father's secretary being taken from her work to answer, or

ascertain for him, how best to get to a certain place, or where to buy this or that. Her knowledge had to cover a vast field, although the majority of her replies only necessitated her telephoning a railway station on the other telephone, whilst he waited on the private line. With few exceptions, he could have looked up the information himself, in a *Bradshaw*, an *A.B.C.*, the newspapers, if it referred to a theatre, or telephoned a shop, himself, to know whether such-and-such a commodity was in stock. But Miss Simkin had become a habit, and she accepted the burden willingly, as did most other people who were asked to do things for young Mr. Preston Daley.

Preston walked into the telephone box, put in two pennies, asked for his number, and waited.

"Miss Simkin? I want the name of an insurance company. No, I don't know the name. That's the trouble. Just give me the names of *all* the companies and I'll tell you which one I want. I'll hang on. All right. . . . I'm listening. . . . No. . . . No. . . . No. . . . The Atlantic?—Yes, that's the one. Here! They've got some branches, haven't they? Yes. South London. Camberwell Green? That's the one. Fine! What's the telephone number there? I'll write it down. Wait till I get my pencil. Oh, *you've* got to look it up first. All right. I'll hang on again.

Preston stood by the telephone, drawing squares on the pad in front of him, presently drawing a face, which was ugly, so he crossed it out, and started to draw a horse.

"What's that? Half a mo'. I'll write that down. Thank you, Miss Simkin. No, nothing more. Many thanks."

Preston, humming a tune, replaced the receiver, and searched for more pennies, and presently he was speaking to Camberwell Green.

"I want to speak to Mr. Bowling. Oh—he's gone to lunch, has he? Right. Damn!" and he replaced the receiver once more.

He left the telephone box, his hands in his trousers pockets, the unfinished melody still on his lips, and ran into Faulkner in the hall, who took his arm and directed him to the bar. There they stood, while two dry Martinis and two pink gins were consumed between them, and the world and its ways were discussed at length and with much hilarity. Tim Faulkner was the same age as Preston and they had both begun life at the same "prep" school. Many riotous evenings were still spent in each other's company, in which women seemed to play rather a large part. They were both a source of revenue to the Bond Street jewellers, which made them, in consequence, even more eligible in the eyes of their admirers. These tall, slim, good-looking young men, each standing over six feet, were almost inseparable in their nightly journeys throughout the West End, and the following morning they would compare notes as to their respective experiences after they had parted company the night before, each with a fair companion.

"But seriously, Tim, Angela's a dear. I dropped her at her flat last night. Oh, yes, I went up for a drink. *No*. Angela's not like that. We played the gramophone for a bit and then I went home. Yes, straight home. That's what I like about Angela. No nonsense about her. All right—*laugh!* I don't mind," and Preston swallowed his third dry Martini.

"You'll be marrying the girl soon," Tim laughed.

"Wouldn't mind if I did," Preston said.

"Well, it's hardly up to form, my lad, is it? I'm afraid that my evening wasn't so blameless, though," Tim said, drinking his second pink gin, reflectively.

"You're just developing into a dirty old man. That's all that's wrong with you, Tim. Just developing into a dirty old man. Besides, you haven't the intelligence to appreciate Angela, anyway. Our conversation last night would have been above your head."

"What, may I ask, was the topic?"

"Ancient Greece."

Faulkner's laughter rang through the bar. The last sip of pink gin went down the wrong way, and he began coughing violently. Preston gave him a resounding slap on the back, which upset the remainder of the pink gin over the bar counter.

"There you are, you see," Preston said. "You can't even drink now without getting it all over yourself."

"You'll have another, sir?" the barman asked, cleaning up the mess with a duster.

"Yes, George, I will. Give Mr. Daley some Eno's. It'll clear his head."

"Briercroft's just been asking for you," Fortescue said, joining them in the crowd at the bar.

"Oh, God! I'd forgotten. He's asked me to lunch. Half a mo', Tim. I'll just go and tell him I can't."

"Are we lunching together?"

"No, I can't do that. I'm going to the Savoy."

"Right. See you to-night?"

"No, I'm taking Angela to a show."

Tim Faulkner shook his head in disgust and picked up his refilled glass.

"It's a pity about Preston," he said to Fortescue. "Gone crackers on some eighteen-year-old daughter of a Night Club Queen."

Preston laughed.

"Well, I don't wish to be personal," he said, "but I don't think that Babs can even *remember* her eighteenth birthday."

Faulkner picked up some olives from the glass dish on the bar counter and threw them at him. Preston closed the door quickly, and walked happily back to the smoking-room, his hands in his trousers pockets. The room had filled up, he noticed. Lord Stirling was with Briercroft in front of the fire now, immaculate in his pepper-and-salt

trousers and his short black coat, his grey hair beautifully groomed, a monocle hanging on a black cord from his neck.

"Well, young Daley," Lord Stirling said, "I hear you're lunching with us."

"I'm afraid I can't, sir. I couldn't catch that fellow, Sir James. He's already left."

"All right, my boy. What time's your appointment?"

"One o'clock."

"Well, it's ten past now. You'd better hurry, or that young woman of yours will be getting impatient."

"It's only a man I knew in the war, sir," Preston replied laughingly, "I promise you."

"I saw your father last night," Stirling said. "Looking remarkably fit, I thought. He tells me he's merging with the Tufton Line."

"I wouldn't know about that, sir."

"But young Daley can give you the winner of the two-thirty," Briercroft said. "It really is amazing the amount of unimportant data this boy carries in his head, Stirling. He'll give you the name of every Derby winner since the inception of the race. But ask him the name of the Prime Minister and he won't know."

"Ah," Stirling mused, "often it is as well to forget that, I'm afraid," and he sipped his sherry thoughtfully.

"Thanks awfully for asking me all the same, sir," Preston said.

In the hall he ran into Tim Faulkner again, and they planned a joint party for Babs and Angela for the following night. Then he walked into Dover Street, turned to the right and picked up a taxi in Piccadilly.

This fellow Bowling is a damned nuisance, he thought. The sooner I stop this habit of mine of asking everyone I meet to lunch, the better. I would like to have stayed with Briercroft and have met this young medical fellow. Leading such a useless sort of life myself, I rather enjoy meeting

people who do real things. And I certainly have a curious collection around me. In the last twenty-four hours there has been—Angela. Well, I suppose I'm crazy about her in my own way. Two months ago it was Iris. Although I told Angela last night that she meant more to me than any other woman I've ever known, I really think that Joan thrilled me most of all. Perhaps that is because she was my first. The first always seems to have a niche of her own. Then there is Tim Faulkner. He is in the Brigade and is, at the moment, stationed at Wellington Barracks. His father allows him four thousand a year and he has never spent less than five. Then there is old Briercroft, who quite rightly pointed out just now the amazing fund of useless information I seem to carry in my head. A really eminent surgeon. Recently, he refused some fantastic fee to travel to India to operate on one of the Indian Princes. The papers have been full of him lately. But he preferred to stay at home, instead, and operate at St. Saviour's Hospital, free of charge, on the poor people of the East End of London. Then there is Lord Stirling. Some said that if he chose to go into the City he would make his fortune. Yet he preferred to remain in Politics. Then there is myself, he thought. My life begins about twelve o'clock each day, and finishes about four the following morning. Into those sixteen hours, I manage to cram the most amazing number of useless things. My father has suggested many times that I go into the business. His latest suggestion is that I read for the Bar. Up to now I have, by artful manœuvring, managed to put off the evil day, but one day the inevitable must happen. I realize that. And the reason that I'm funking it is not because I am afraid of work. My dread is that I'll be a failure. It is so long since I applied myself to anything. Of course, the war is responsible; it came at a critical time in my life. At least, that is what I keep telling myself. It is a beautiful alibi, anyway. My father's suggestion that I should take a long holiday

after I was demobilized was a normal one; many sons did exactly the same thing. But the fact that I have prolonged this holiday until it has become a permanent state with me, is of my own volition and cunning. But it cannot go on like this. I shall have to start doing something one day. I have a dread of the second-rate, too. In my present state, I am as good a "Playboy" as the next, which is my only qualification. On my last trip to New York that is what the news-hawks called me. They plastered my photograph across the society pages. "*London's 'Playboy' visits New York.*" It rather amused me. It gave me a sense of importance. But the standard is wrong. I know that. Even this damned fellow, Bowling, works! Bowling? I wonder, he thought, how this fellow lives? He looked quite shabby the last time I saw him. A timid little fellow. The fellow the Mess were so unkind to because he was a ranker. And they only knew that because of the D.C.M. on his chest—a medal he had won for bravery in the field. That is the way my friends viewed it, Preston thought. A curious attitude, really. Does Bowling have affairs with women, as Tim and I do, I wonder? I suppose he does. But how drab! Perhaps some little intrigue with a shop-girl. The sort of thing I see sometimes in the park, on a summer evening. Soldiers and servant girls arm in arm. Shop-girls and clerks demurely embracing on the grass near the trees. Clerks? Well, I suppose that Bowling must be a clerk, if it comes to that. A curious thought. Just like one of those hundreds in my father's business, who touch their hats to me and say "Good morning, Mr. Preston." And I'm taking him to lunch at the Savoy! Yet we were brother officers two years ago. The only thing we had in common, even then, was the regimental badge on the lapels of our tunics. But he was a good little chap in his way, I suppose. He put me to bed twice when I was drunk, I remember, and saved me from old Square Guts' volubility in the Orderly Room the following morning. He was always around trying

to do things for me, now I come to think of it, rather like a faithful dog. And I could never do wrong, in his eyes, either. Even when I forgot his damned lunch the other day, he wrote to me to say that the mistake must be his. And when I agreed that it was, he even wrote back again to apologize! Perhaps it *would* have been unkind to have put him off again. But a clerk! The position is not without humour, he thought, my entertaining a clerk to lunch at the Savoy. . . . I see that it is twenty-five minutes past one already, too. The poor little devil must have been waiting since one o'clock. I must really try to organize myself better. Anyhow, we're just turning into the Savoy now. . . . And he hastily paid off the taxi and walked into the Grill Room entrance.

Entering the lounge, he walked hurriedly to the end, and gave his hat and coat to the attendant. The Grill Room, through the glass partition, seemed full. A few people were still sitting drinking their cocktails in the lounge. A hand grasped his arm suddenly. He turned.

"Hello, Bowling."

"I thought you weren't coming," Martin said. "I've just been through to the other side to see if you were there. Thought, perhaps, something had happened."

"No. I was held up. How are you? Sorry I'm late. Come and have a drink."

"I'll have a Manhattan, thank you," Martin said, following him to a table.

They both sat down, Bowling adjusting a yellow foulard handkerchief in his breast pocket, Preston signalling to a waiter. "Well, it's too bad my being late like this. I hope it doesn't put you out. Will you have to hurry over lunch, now?"

"Oh, no. I've plenty of time, Daley."

"Good. A dry Martini, and what was yours?"

"A Manhattan."

"And a Manhattan."

A waiter bowed, and disappeared.

"Well, how's the insurance business?"

"Going well, thank you, Daley. Did you speak to your father?"

"About what?"

"About his insurances."

"His insurances?"

"Well, didn't you say that you would have a talk to him about his insurances?"

"Did I?"

Martin seemed to fidget unnecessarily with his foulard tie.

"Oh, I thought," he said, "that you were going to see if some of his business could not be transferred to the Atlantic."

Preston sat for a moment.

"That's right," he said, "so I was."

"Oh—well, it doesn't matter, you know," Martin replied, still fingering his tie. "I just wondered, you know. Naturally, we'd like to have his business, but if it's any trouble for you to ask him . . ."

"My dear Bowling—not at all. Just so sorry that I forgot. Would getting our business help you?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. I'd get the commission, you know. But, of course, it isn't only that. It would be a great thing for the branch to handle your father's business. It would be a fine thing for the company, too."

"Bowling—a personal question. What do you earn?"

The suddenness of this question seemed to electrify Martin, who moved perceptibly, as if he had been struck.

"Well," he replied a moment later. "I'm getting a rise at Christmas."

"Perhaps I shouldn't ask you. A damned impertinent thing to ask."

"Oh, no. Not at all. I'll tell you. I'll be earning two hundred a year at Christmas."

"What do you earn now?"

"One hundred and seventy-five."

Preston sat looking at this man across the small table by the side of the wall. One hundred and seventy-five pounds a year! It was fantastic. Why, he thought, I spend almost that in a week sometimes! Bowling was fingering the matches now, in their silver-plated holder, lifting them up and letting them fall back into position. One hundred and seventy-five pounds a year! And, apart from that terrible tie, Bowling looked quite neat and tidy. Eminently respectable. He had nice eyes, too. What is the good of imagining the sort of a life this little man lived, he thought. What sort of a life *can* he lead on an income like that? Why, my father's butler earns that amount—and receives tips in addition!

"Shouldn't have asked you that question," Preston said.

"Don't know why I did. Still, I appreciate your confidence."

"Oh," Martin replied, "I'm getting on very nicely, really. Many of the chaps on the staff aren't earning that much. Insurance clerks aren't well paid, you know."

"How do you manage on that?" Preston asked, seriously.

"I mean, how can you go about to restaurants, and so on?"

"Oh—I don't often do that, you see," Martin replied.

"Well, here's luck," Preston said, taking his fourth dry Martini and swallowing it in one gulp. "It's nice to see you."

Martin took his cocktail and sat with it in his hands. Then he slowly put the glass to his lips.

"It's very nice to see you too, Daley," he said.

"Let's go in to lunch."

They both rose from the table then, and Martin followed Preston into the Grill Room. The imperturbable Sovrani gave a shrug of his shoulders and pointed to the crowded room.

"Mr. Daley," he said, "where can I put you? I have no table. Perhaps in a minute. I am so sorry. Ah—I think people are leaving in the corner there. A minute. I'll go and see."

Sovrani walked over towards the corner table, as people rose from it, and other waiters began bowing them away. A little gesticulating and Sovrani signalled to them. Martin and Preston both edged their way behind people's chairs until they reached the table in the extreme corner, overlooking the courtyard, and a clean tablecloth was quickly spread and waiters became busy at their table.

"What will you eat?"

"You choose," Martin said, as Preston began studying the menu.

"Like a little smoked salmon to start with?"

"Yes. I'd like that."

"And what about an *entrecôte*?"

"I don't think I know what that is," Martin said, leaning forward.

"*Entrecôte minute*. It's a sort of grilled steak—cut very thin."

"Yes," Martin said, leaning back again, his hands on the table, "that sounds very nice."

"Or would you like a wing of chicken?"

"No, I'll have the—what you said first," he said.

"Right. Usual vegetables? Like a salad with it?"

"Yes, that would be nice, too."

"Right—and drink what?"

"What do you usually drink, Daley?"

"Like Burgundy?"

"Yes. That would be fine."

Preston ran his finger down a wine list, gave an order, and for a time waiters were dispensed with.

"So you're getting on well—eh?" Preston asked, leaning across the table.

"Oh, yes, Daley. Things are looking up all round now."

Of course, it seemed funny going back to the office, first of all, after all the fun we used to have. But I soon got used to it. Fell back into the old ways, you know. Of course, I'm in a branch office now. It's better experience there. It's smaller and you can see all the workings, which you can't in a Head Office. It's too vast there. Too departmentalized. In a branch, each department works side by side and you can easily cotton on to the next man's job. That is, if you want to."

"You're ambitious, then?"

"Well, Daley—I am. I didn't used to be, though."

"Why the change?"

Martin shrugged his shoulders, and smiled, as a faint blush came to his cheeks.

"I don't know," he said. "Things generally."

"A woman?"

"Well—partly," and Martin's cheeks seemed to become a deeper red.

"I've an idea. What are you doing to-morrow night?"

"Nothing, Daley," Martin replied.

"Well, how about going to Claridge's? There's a Charity Ball on there. I've got two tickets."

"*Claridge's*." And after a pause: "I'm afraid I've no one to take now."

"How about this woman of yours?"

"Well, she's on her way to Paris. I saw her off on the boat train this morning."

"To Paris—eh? That sounds a bit gay, Bowling."

"Oh, no. Only business," Martin said.

"She's in business, too?"

"She's a secretary."

"In your company?"

"Oh, no. In the City."

"Well, I've got two tickets going if you want them. Supper is thrown in. It only means buying your champagne."

Martin ceased fingering his tie and looked thoughtfully out into the courtyard.

"I'd forgotten. I shall be busy to-morrow night, Daley," he said. "But it's nice of you to ask me all the same."

"Well, the tickets are there, if you want them. Do you dance much?"

Martin turned.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I'm afraid I'm not very good, though."

"Where do you usually go?"

"Well, my sister's firm have dances now and again. I go with her sometimes."

"But don't you go to other places, too?"

"No, Daley. I've never been to a dance in a restaurant, if that's what you mean."

Preston sat back in his chair and looked at the man the other side of the table. This really is fantastic, he thought. This is quite a new experience. A man who has never been about to the usual places! But there is something rather likeable about him, all the same—with his slim sloping shoulders, and his rather nice smile. His delight when we ran into each other in Piccadilly the other day was not concealed and the warmth of his handshake was refreshing. It brought back the old days quite vividly. I remember now. He would wait upon me slavishly in those days, carrying out the most menial tasks for me with a willingness that caused much amusement in the Mess, and many pointed suggestions were bandied about over his dog-like devotion to me. He would relieve me of any duty that I especially wished to avoid, too. He had even foregone his Christmas leave when a skeleton number of officers had to remain on duty and it had been Bowling's turn for leave. But he had stayed behind, cancelling his own arrangements directly he knew that I wanted to get away for Christmas. And this quiet little fellow, who has never been to a night-club, had become

demobilized, in due course, and had returned to his old occupation as a clerk. If it had not been for that chance meeting in Piccadilly, I would never have given him a thought again. He was just a little ranker, who was given promotion on the field, and the Mess were unkind to him because of his humble background. He had never asserted himself in those days. In fact, if I had remembered him at all, Preston thought, it would have been as a little fellow who sat at the bottom of the table at dinner and who never seemed to speak.

"Tell me about your life," Preston asked suddenly.

"Well, Daley—I had hoped that you would tell me about yours," Martin said.

"But mine's so dull. It just goes on. I don't do anything worth doing, like you and others do. I don't work. I just play. That's what I am—just a 'Playboy.' Nothing very creditable. Nothing really very *discreditable*. But I'm hardly a serious topic of conversation," and Preston again leant across the table. "Do you ever see any of the old crowd," he asked, after there had been a long silence, "like Bentinck and the rest?"

"No. You're the only one I've seen, Daley. I don't go out much, you see. At least, not to the places where they would all go. I have pretty regular hours at my job, and now that we've moved, I either take Carol out . . ."

"Carol?"

"The girl who lives in our house."

"The one who's gone to Paris?"

"Yes. We go to the pictures sometimes, or go out for a walk. Nothing very exciting from your point of view, Daley, I suppose. But then, beggars can't be choosers, you see. One day I'll alter all that, though," he added, looking again into the courtyard.

"How, Bowling?"

Martin paused before replying.

"Well—I'm going to get on, you see," he said. "I've stopped drifting like I used to. There's room for everyone somewhere near the top, if you make the effort. That's what I tell the fellows in the office. *They're* just sitting there waiting for their pensions. I'm not going to do that."

"What's your ambition?"

Martin paused again.

"It's funny," he said, "but I can't even define that. I just want to get on. That's all I know."

"In insurance?"

"No. Not necessarily. In fact, I'd like to change my job, if I could find the right thing. I'd like to do something where I got about more. It's very confined in a branch office, you know. No, I can't tell you exactly what it is I want to do, Daley. I just know that I want to get on."

"Ever thought of going abroad?"

"Well, there's Mother, you see. I couldn't leave her. She's not very strong."

"And Carol?"

The colour seemed to rush to Martin's cheeks with a deeper hue.

"You mustn't think," he said, "that there's anything between Carol and me. We're not engaged, or anything like that, Daley. She just happens to live in our house—at least, we live in the Tibbits' house. We're just good friends, you know. We go out together sometimes, and I often go down to their part of the house in the evening and we play some game, or have a talk. But she's a very wonderful girl, Daley. I want you to meet her when she gets back from Paris. In fact, I had thought of asking you if I could bring her to-day. She's heard so much about you, and when she saw your photograph . . ."

"My photograph? Where?"

"Oh—didn't I tell you? You see, you once gave me a photograph. I don't suppose you'll remember. In the Mess,

one night. You were signing them and handing them out to all the people in the Ante Room . . .”

“I was? When?”

“Oh—one night. They were complimentary sittings from the London photographers after you had won your M.C. Don’t you remember?”

Preston furrowed his brow.

“No,” he said. “I remember having some photographs taken, but I can’t remember what happened to them. *What* did you say I did with them?”

“You signed them in the Mess one night, and gave them out wholesale. I asked you if I could have one and you signed one for me. Don’t you remember?”

“Blessed if I do!” Preston laughed.

“Well, you were a little drunk at the time, Daley,” Martin said, and laughed, too.

The atmosphere seemed to relax suddenly. Preston laughed loudly.

“I did *that*, did I?” he asked. “And where did you come across it again?”

“Oh—I had it framed. It’s on my mantelpiece.”

“What—*my* photograph is on your mantelpiece?”

“Oh, yes, Daley,” Martin said, eating his smoked salmon with a little more assurance, “it’s always been there.”

“What did I write on the picture?” Preston asked, leaning forward, frowning interestedly.

“It was rather rude,” Martin smiled, eating some brown bread and butter. “But it’s in an oval mount, now, and the rudest part doesn’t show.”

“You’re a staggering fellow.”

“Why?”

“Why have you kept my photograph?”

“You were always kind to me, Daley,” Martin said. “Some of the others weren’t, you know. But I’ve never forgotten your kindnesses to me.”

"What did I ever do?"

"Oh, lots of things, Daley. I used to feel a little out of place at times. I was shy in those days, you know. But you were always nice to me. Even from the first day I saw you in the Orderly Room."

I do not remember doing one decent thing for this fellow, Preston thought. Yet he pays to have my picture framed and he puts it on his mantelpiece, and now he is thanking me for being kind! I am much too self-interested to trouble about other people, least of all this man sitting opposite to me. I am assuming a halo now which does not belong to me. But I am, at the same time, rather enjoying this halo. If I had telephoned him before he left his office, I should have cancelled this lunch. The prospect of lunching with him was a crashing bore, anyway. Now it seems that this is not to be the last occasion I am to meet him either; he wants me to meet this girl of his when she gets back from Paris. Not as I say to people, "I'll see you soon," not having any intention of doing so. Well, I suppose, at the end of lunch, I *shall* say to him, "Let's meet again soon, Bowling, and you must bring that girl of yours along, too." And I'll have no intention of asking either of them along. It will be just the polite thing to say. Besides, this friendship of his with the little typist-secretary must be a pretty grim sort of an affair, and I can't see myself asking them both out. And yet there is a sweetness about this fellow, who only reaches up to my shoulder when we're standing side by side, who has just taken his first sip of Chambertin and has told me that it is very nice. In fact, "nice" seems to be the extent of his vocabulary. There is, in a way, something rather fine about this little fellow, striving in his small way to become a little more important than he is, but who can never mean anything in the scheme of things. Until a week or two ago, I had forgotten his existence. Less than an hour ago, I was trying to avoid him. If I remember rightly, with my small

seniority, I used to give him Hell in the old days. But here he is thanking me for being kind to him! And I am rather enjoying the experience! I find this fellow quite likeable on second acquaintance, mainly, I suppose, because he thinks that I am such a fine fellow. Analysed, that is conceit, of course. But then, I *am* conceited. Only fools have no conceit. With women I am my biggest success. That is because I am now a competent lover and I have money to spend on them into the bargain. There is little satisfaction in success when it comes so easily. But this experience over a lunch table has rather touched me. Young Bowling has sipped his wine again, and has surreptitiously turned the bottle over in its cradle so that he can read the whole of the label.

"I haven't had this before," he said. "It's very nice, Daley, isn't it?"

"Tell me more of yourself, Bowling."

"What else can I tell you, Daley? Besides, I want to hear about you. I've so often wondered what you were doing. Sometimes I thought I would telephone you. I knew where you lived, you see. Do you remember the night I dined with you at your house?"

"No! Did you?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Oh—yes. I believe you did. Well, I've travelled quite a lot since the war. I've been to America twice."

"To America? That must be a wonderful place, Daley."

"It is."

Preston began to tell him about it in a rather desultory fashion. An amusing place. Of its wonderful hospitality. He had won the pool on the boat going out, which had paid all his expenses. Broadway. The theatres. Westchester. The golf and polo there. The Country Clubs. The Hudson River. The skyscrapers by night. The fast-moving traffic. The crazy side-shows at Coney Island. The crowd at Atlantic City on Labour Day. Of Lindy's. Of meeting some of the film stars.

Touching upon a romance which began on the boat coming home. These things Preston told him over their second course, elaborating on his story at times, when he realized the obvious delight that he was giving to Bowling, whose food became cold as he sat, listening rapturously to Preston's disjointed story of the last two years.

"Yes," Martin said thoughtfully, "America must be a great country. Full of opportunities."

"Would you go there, if you could?"

Martin paused before replying.

"I suppose I would," he said, "if I knew that Mother would be all right."

"And Carol?" Preston asked, smilingly. "How about her?"

"Well, Carol and I, you see, have no understanding between us, Daley. I would hate to leave her behind, if I ever did go abroad. It's no good denying that. But I don't suppose I ever shall. She is responsible for most of the things I feel now, you see. In fact, she's all I've got, really. She is the only one I can talk to—who feels about things as I do. But I couldn't very well ask her to go with me, if I ever went. At least, not till I've made some position for myself. There's nothing cheap about Carol. If I do anything with her, it has to be of the best. Before I definitely ask her to marry me, it will have to be a decent income I'm earning. I couldn't pig it with her. We both have to do that now, and we both despise it. We hate squalor. That's why I'm trying to get all the business I can, to make myself valuable to my company, and earn some commission, which I can put by for the future. Carol has made me feel this way, you see. We both build our castles, I'm afraid." Then, after a pause, when he had fidgeted with his wine-glass: "She's a wonderful girl, Daley," he said for the second time, looking up. "You'll realize that, too, when you meet her."

"I hope you'll fix that soon," Preston said, with unexpected warmth.

"Yes, Daley. We've often talked about you."

A silence fell upon both men, as a waiter took away their plates.

"It's funny my telling you all this," Martin said, presently. "I never thought I could. But then, like Carol, you seem to bring the best out of me. You always did. I feel better after being with either of you. It's a wonderful gift," he added, as he sat looking at the Chambertin in its wicker cradle, his fingers idly touching the side.

"And I feel the reverse," Preston said.

"I'm sorry, Daley. . . ."

"Not that way, Bowling. You just make me feel rather small, that's all."

A man came to their table, and Preston made the introduction. For some moments Martin listened to these two men talking, but he took no part in the conversation. He seemed fascinated by the wicker cradle in which the Chambertin lay. Finally, the other man left their table.

"I'm sorry for that interruption," Preston said, sitting down once more. "I was just about to make a very frank confession. But I won't now. Instead, I'm going to ask you to dine with me the day after to-morrow. Meantime, there is some very excellent port here and we're going to have half a bottle."

XI

THE CAMBERWELL GREEN BRANCH of the Atlantic Insurance Company closed its doors earlier on Christmas Eve. Miss Smith became the possessor of two boxes of chocolates; Norman, the office-boy, became richer by fifteen shillings. After much hand-shaking and mutual good wishes, Martin found himself leaving the office in the company of Mr. Hilton and Peter Thomas, both of whom suggested that a visit should be paid to the public-house near by, before going their respective ways. So the three of them walked cheerfully into the cosy warmth of the saloon bar on the corner, Mr. Hilton ordering three cherry brandies and placing his parcel of plants on the counter beside him.

"Yes," Peter Thomas mused, "time flies all right, Mr. Hilton. It's eleven years since *I* joined, even. Doesn't seem like it, either."

"No. That's a fact. It only seems the other day when you first joined as office-boy, Thomas."

"Yes," Peter Thomas said. "Old Drake was sitting on the same stool, even then."

"So was I," Mr. Hilton pointed out. "I've sat at the same desk now for twenty-four years. I retire on pension in five years."

"Go on, Mr. Hilton!"

"Yes. A fact. I used to be on the counter once, sitting where you sit, Bowling."

"Yes?"

"Houghton died. So did Johnson. Adams, poor chap, got tubercular. Otherwise, there have been few changes in the

branch since I've known it. Nothing seems to change. Same thing year in, year out."

"What was Mr. Thistlewaite when you joined?" Martin asked.

"Chief Clerk. Drake was doing Brown's job. Bolton left to better himself, I'd forgotten that. Of course, that's why you were transferred here, Bowling."

"That's right."

"But then, Bolton never hit it off with Drake."

"I don't seem to, either."

"No, Bowling, that's a fact. Still, Drake's a funny chap when he gets his knife into a fellow."

"Of course, you asked for it, really," Peter Thomas said, "that day you answered him back."

"Yes, he's been worse since then," Mr. Hilton agreed. "What made you do it, Bowling?"

Martin looked at his boots.

"I don't know," he said. "I just couldn't stand being baited that day."

"I think it was all the champagne you had for lunch," Peter Thomas laughed.

"Maybe," Martin agreed, still looking at his boots.

"You really ought to have mentioned to him, before leaving, that Mr. Thistlewaite had given you permission to be away longer. After all, he *is* Chief Clerk, you know."

"I apologized afterwards."

"Yes, I know. But he's not the sort to forget a thing like that. Of course, it *was* a foggy day and you had a good excuse as it was."

"Well, I just couldn't stand his bullying manner when I got back," Martin said.

"He's certainly got it in for you all right. You can't seem to do anything right in his eyes nowadays."

"No."

"Of course, Mr. Drake has a fear of Head Office," Peter

Thomas pointed out. "Anyone transferred from there is always regarded with suspicion. It was the same with Bolton."

"Yes. That's partly why Bolton left, in my view. I wonder you stand it, Bowling, as you do."

"My one little outburst seems to have caused enough trouble," Martin smiled. "You can't do more than tell the Chief Clerk to go to Hell."

"No," Peter Thomas agreed. "But that was Dutch courage, Martin. All the champagne you'd drunk at lunch, with that Mr. Daley. You were too drunk to remember to bring me back that cigar, even!" and Peter Thomas laughed.

"Yes, you were in a queer mood when you returned that afternoon, Bowling, and no mistake," Mr. Hilton said. "Never seen you like it before."

"Well, I just couldn't stand being baited," Martin said again, still looking at his boots.

"He must be a rich fellow, this Daley," Mr. Hilton mused, having drained the last dreg in his glass. "Saw the proposals that came in this morning. Fifteen hundred on his car."

"He *is* rich."

"And his personal effects—he's got some valuable studs and links, watches, cigarette-cases, and so on, from what I saw."

"He has."

"Going to get any more business from him?"

"I hope so."

"His father ought to be able to put quite a bit your way, too."

"Yes."

"A nice little connection, if you work it right. Approached him for a life policy yet?"

"No—not yet."

"Well, you might get quite a nice little Endowment policy, if you work it right."

"A man like this Daley doesn't need endowments," Peter Thomas pointed out. "By the time it'll be falling due, he should have come into his father's money. No, what he wants, Martin, is a straightforward life insurance, which he can leave to his wife, when he dies, to pay the Death Duties. That's the way to tackle him. Then his estate won't be interfered with, see? That's the way I'd canvass a rich young fellow like that."

"Yes, if money's no object," Mr. Hilton agreed, "that *is* the best way to tackle a prospect, I suppose—on what'll happen to his wife and his estate when he dies. It's no good stressing what he'll be drawing on an endowment while he's alive, or he'll start working it out as an investment, and start arguing how much more he could have made on the Stock Exchange. No, I'd tackle him on Table 'H'—ordinary life, with profits. That's the sort of policy he wants."

"Well, I'll leave it to him to let me know," Martin replied, looking up. "How about another before we go?"

"On me, Martin."

"No—on me. Three cherry brandies, please, miss."

"Doing anything exciting for Christmas, Bowling?"

"No. Staying at home."

"I'm going to Felixstowe," Peter Thomas volunteered.

"Again?"

"Yes. I'm taking a friend of mine down there, Mr. Hilton. It makes a nice change and the air's good. Thanks, Martin. Your health, and a happy Christmas again. And while I'm about it, let's have a toast. Let's hope that nineteen hundred and twenty-one will be a better year all round. No office squabbles. Plenty of new business and rises for all of us," and Peter Thomas's glass was raised.

"I drink to that," Mr. Hilton said.

"So do I," Martin added.

"And a real merry time into the bargain."

"Yes, with lots of good cheer."

Three glasses were raised, drained, and replaced on the bar counter.

"Ought to have included a special toast to you, Martin, over this Daley business. I hope it'll lead to big things."

"Thanks, Peter."

"Mr. Thistlewaite seems very pleased," Mr. Hilton said. "Seems to have taken quite a fancy to you lately."

"Yes, and that doesn't please old Drake, either," Peter Thomas pointed out.

"No. A proper jealous fellow, Drake. Always was. Niggardly sort of mind, really. Bit of an old woman, too."

"Yes, he's not my favourite man," Martin smiled. "Still, it's Christmas-time, so let's think of more pleasant things."

"Yes, that's the idea. And my thoughts are for the wife and kids. I've got the Christmas-tree to do before I go to bed to-night. And I've a lot to do in the garden over the holiday. A pity Christmas falls on a Saturday this year. Still, it has to sometimes, I suppose. How about it, boys? Coming along? Good night, miss. A happy Christmas."

"The same to you, gentlemen. Good night."

"Good night."

They parted outside the public-house, with renewed good wishes for Christmas, Mr. Hilton carrying his plants carefully under his arm and Martin jumping on to the first tram that passed. It was curious, he thought, climbing the stairs to the top, that his colleagues should have referred to that foggy afternoon a month before. He had not told them that after leaving the Porchester Club that unhappy afternoon he had groped his way, in the fog, to a Lyons' Teashop near Trafalgar Square and had sat stirring his coffee so long with a spoon that it had become too cold for him to drink. Nor that he had eaten nothing during those four hours that he had been away from the office. His sullen mood, on his return, had been mistaken for intoxication by Peter Thomas, who was convinced that champagne had flowed generously

during the luncheon, and Martin had not disabused his mind on that point. But his outburst in the main office, to which his friends had just referred, had saved Martin, at that moment, from losing every vestige of his self-respect. Something had seemed to snap in his brain as Mr. Drake had questioned him sarcastically about this sudden association with the aristocracy. And so the original lie had grown. It first became magnified when Mr. Thistlewaite had called Martin into his office to learn the results of the lunch. "We really must get that business, Bowling," he had said. "Keep at him." The daily questionings from Mr. Thistlewaite that followed, had driven Martin into a deeper despair. Shortly, he had realized that the plans that he had laid so carefully were fading fast and that if Preston did not come to his aid soon, his very livelihood would be in jeopardy. The draft of a letter to Preston had finally been decided upon, but the intervening days before a hastily scribbled reply had arrived at Linden Terrace had filled Martin with growing alarm. Martin remembered, too, his concern at the Savoy recently, when the minutes had passed and there had been no sign of Preston. Of how he had walked distractedly through into the restaurant to see whether Preston had arrived and had already started his lunch. And then Preston entering the lounge. The same Preston—tall, handsome, knowledgeable, and kind. Their lunch at the corner table, which he had described to Carol in such detail in his last letter. He had promised, in that letter, to take her there, to the same table, the very moment that she returned home. There was such a beautiful view over the courtyard from there, and you could see the people going into the matinée at the Savoy Theatre opposite. It would be even more beautiful there at night, with the women in their evening clothes, all of which he had described to Carol in detail. And his long conversation with Preston, too. All that he had received from Carol, in exchange, had been a picture postcard of *The Madeleine*.

But Carol had so little spare time, she had said on that card. He knew that she would be thrilled to hear about his lunch with Preston, anyway. Preston seemed to bring the best out of people and he had found himself talking quite gaily over their lunch table. He had even told Preston about Carol and Preston seemed anxious to meet her. The night when these two met would be a wonderful experience. It was such a good thing that his first evening suit was already in hand, the first fitting of which had turned out so well. Of course, this suit had made deep inroads into his fast diminishing capital, but the long tails seemed to give him added height, and he would have to have a dress-suit now, anyway. Perhaps they would all dine at the Savoy Grill.

Of course, dining with Preston two nights after their first lunch had not necessitated wearing evening clothes. Preston had told him not to worry about dressing, which had been rather fortunate, as his dress-suit would not be ready. And it was wonderful the way Preston had talked to him over dinner at the Ivy. It did not seem as if much—if any—of his father's business could be transferred to the Atlantic. That, at first, had been a bitter blow. In any case, they were not due for renewal yet, but perhaps nearer the time, something might be arranged. Anyhow, Preston's own small insurances were to be transferred at Christmas, the handing over of which that very morning had done much to renew his confidence. He had flaunted them a little defiantly in front of Mr. Drake, before taking them in to Mr. Thistlewaite.

It was, however, of other things that Preston had talked so enthusiastically over their dinner, and mainly he had spoken of America. His father's business had an office in New York. That was the sort of thing that Martin should think about, Preston had said, to get right away from the humdrum life he seemed to be leading in London, and to start life afresh in a new country, where youth had a real chance. But, of course, Preston did not really understand.

Martin could not leave his mother, if these enthusiasms of Preston's should ever bear fruit. Although his mother had mentioned recently that Joyce and Stanley Heavitree seemed to be seeing a great deal of each other and that she would not be surprised if one day there might not be some interesting developments, he could not, in that eventuality, ask Stanley Heavitree to have his mother to live with them permanently. Besides, it was all pure supposition, in any case. He felt sure, however, that Stanley Heavitree would be the first to fall in with such a suggestion, as, during his recent visits to Linden Terrace, he had sat quite devotedly by his mother's bedside, and had recently suggested that he should read to her, as her eyes had lately been giving her some trouble. He was now a regular visitor to the house and was doing very well in his new job at Benskin's in Oxford Street. It would be splendid for Joyce. It would be splendid for Stanley, too, as he needed a woman to look after his little house at Putney and to take care of his child. All this, of course, was sheer supposition, but it might be a way out, if Preston's ideas should one day take more concrete form. Above all, it would be splendid to get away from the atmosphere now existing in his office at Camberwell Green. His colleagues still seemed a little distant. And, in a curious way, he found himself feeling detached about them, too. They did not seem to exist in his world, as they had done in the old days. Even that old stick-in-the-mud, Peter Thomas, was not really such an ideal companion, and was not really amusing, when compared with Preston Daley. And Miss Smith was not really attractive, and her laugh was a trifle shrill. He rather disliked, too, the cheap scent that she used. Carol's was so fragrant. . . . These things Martin Bowling contemplated as the tram rattled its way towards Clapham Common on that Christmas Eve.

He alighted eventually from the tramcar and began walking across the Common. He had made a special point of

shaking Mr. Drake's horny hand with unnecessary emphasis, before leaving. He had given Norman two shillings and the same to Mrs. Green, who whitened the office steps. The two glasses of cherry brandy were still warming him as he walked briskly across the Common. If only Carol were home! That thought was uppermost in his mind. He had looked forward so keenly to spending his first Christmas with her. But her work had now taken her to Budapest. She would remain in Budapest until New Year's Day, she had said. It would not be possible for them now to watch the Old Year out and the New Year in. He had pictured them going into the garden, away from Bert Freeman and the others, who would be singing lustily in the street as the sirens sounded. And as the last stroke of midnight would chime, Martin had decided to tell Carol. That is how he had planned it. He was going to tell her about Preston's suggestion of America, too. And then, perhaps, the first announcement of the New Year would be of their engagement. . . . The very thought filled Martin with a beautiful happiness and content, just as it had done when Carol had taken his arm on the night of the party, and he had felt, at last, that she was within his reach. Dear Carol! He would miss her tremendously during the holidays. His week-ends at home now were empty. They held nothing. He went either to a football match with Walter Tibbit, or he remained quietly in his room. On Sundays, he would walk on the Common, choosing the same paths that he had walked with Carol, or he would talk with Walter Tibbit, or play dominoes with him in the front room, a game in which his landlord took a special delight, recounting always the games that he had played after lunch in the City in the old days. Or he would play a game of billiards at the Reindeer, in which Bert Freeman, Fred Potter, and often Mr. George would join them. But Martin found little enjoyment in these things. He wanted only to write to Carol—to tell her, always, of his thoughts. Now he did not even know

her address in Budapest! He could not write to her for Christmas! Nor could he send her the bracelet that he had bought for her, which would go so well with the pendant that he had given her for her birthday.

The sky seemed filled with myriad stars as the moon rose slowly in the heavens. Martin paused in his walk. The air was clear and fresh as it brushed against his cheeks, bringing colour to them. The moon was not yet full, but there should be a full moon by New Year's Eve. But what did that matter now? Carol would still be in Budapest! Yet the moon will be there when she returns, he thought. I will have seen Preston again before then, too, and I will have further news. . . . Three months ago, I was one of the little men, one of the men who just sit and wait for their pensions. When I lived in Muswell Hill, that is just what I was. I did not belong anywhere. Now everything has changed. Carol has done this. I should not expect every castle that I build to materialize the moment that I plan it. Everything will happen at its appointed time. I have only this one jarring note in my life, but Mr. Drake is one of the small men, anyway, and I must not worry too much about that. And he continued to walk along the Common, some small Christmas gifts bulging from the pockets of his new overcoat.

Three months! How much had happened! How quickly it had passed! It is funny, he thought, but the moment that old Walter Tibbit opened the door to me, in his shirt sleeves, when we arrived on the day of the move, I *knew* that we had done a wise thing in choosing to live in that house. Fate plays such strange tricks in our lives, he thought. We might so easily have gone to live with Uncle Henry at Carshalton.

He opened the front door at Number Five Linden Terrace, to find Walter Tibbit on a ladder, hanging a solitary piece of mistletoe from the hall light.

"Just steady the ladder a moment, Martin, will you? It's a bit rocky up here."

Martin stood gladly holding the unsteady step-ladder.

"I've got all the holly up."

"Good!"

"And Mother wants you to go down and give our pudding a stir."

"Right. I will."

"Don't forget to wish."

"No," Martin said cheerfully, "I won't."

"And then we might just go round and wish Mr. George the compliments of the season. Pass up that other piece of string, will you, Martin? It's lying on the floor, there."

Martin leant down, still holding the ladder with the other hand, and the string was passed up.

"Business all right?"

"Yes, fine, thanks, Mr. Tibbit."

"Have any celebrations in the office before you left?"

"Well, I just had a drink with two of the fellows."

"That's right. It makes quite a little change, don't it, Martin, at Christmas-time? All the fellows getting together."

"Yes."

"I used to go to the Bodega every Christmas Eve, as regular as clockwork, in the old days. Take some of the fellows with me, you know. Sit round there having a jollification—stories, and so on. Used to look forward to that. I suppose you ain't got any scissors on you?"

"No. I've got a penknife."

"Well, I'd like the loan of it, if you don't mind. Can't have pieces of string dangling about, you know."

"No."

In due course the mistletoe was securely hung. The step-ladder had been put away. The holly had been admired, as it was draped over the tops of the pictures. The pudding had been stirred. Martin had made his wish. The coloured paper chains festooned about the kitchen had come in for comment, also. Shortly, Walter Tibbit was wishing Mr. George

the compliments of the season. Fred Potter had looked into the Reindeer for the same purpose, and the three of them had walked back to Linden Terrace, pausing at the gate to have a final word. By eleven-thirty Martin had long forgotten his quarrel with Mr. Drake. His breathing came steadily, as he lay quietly asleep in his bed. No lights shone through the venetian blinds in any of the houses in Linden Terrace, a policeman passing with his flash-lamp being the street's only reveller.

Martin became aware of someone standing over his bed. He jumped to a sitting position, to find Walter Tibbit by his side.

"Martin!" Walter whispered quickly. "There's something wrong. The James'!"

"How? What?"

"Gas. An awful smell of gas. Their door is locked. I can't get in."

In a moment Martin was out of bed, following Walter Tibbit hurriedly down the stairs.

"Hadrn't the courage to break the door down myself, Martin. Frightened at what I might see. Listen!"

Martin shivered. He and Walter Tibbit, in turn, put their ears to the keyhole. Martin heard a faint hissing. There was no question about gas. The smell in the passage was already almost overpowering.

"We must break down this door!"

"Yes, Martin."

"A chair!"

"Yes. A chair."

They both ran down the stairs, switching on the lights as they passed a switch.

"How did you find out?"

"Couldn't sleep, Martin. Came up for the *Sporting Life*,

which I'd left in the front room. Thought I smelt something. Walked up to see."

"Let's use our shoulders."

"Yes."

They both ran up the stairs again, Walter Tibbit, in his torn dressing-gown, following quickly behind. The smell of gas seemed to have increased.

"Your shoulder! Hard! No, *harder!*"

"Yes, Martin. Harder."

"Let's break a panel in."

"A hammer?"

"Yes, a hammer. Quick!"

"Try once more."

"It won't go. Get a hammer!"

"Yes, Martin."

"I'll come with you."

"Yes, you'd better come with me."

Down the stairs again, Walter Tibbit endeavouring to keep pace with him.

"How about this?"

"Yes, use that."

Up the stairs again, with the coal bucket, Walter Tibbit's wisp of hair falling to the wrong side, so that it fell over his right eye.

"I'll do it."

"Yes. You do it, Martin."

A panel broken at last. Martin put his hand through the gaping hole and turned the key.

"Steady, Mr. Tibbit. Put a handkerchief over your mouth."

"Haven't got one, Martin."

"Take mine."

"No. I'll use my dressing-gown."

"Right. Follow me!"

"The gas-fire's on the left, Martin."

"I'll switch on the light. Get those windows open—quick."

Walter Tibbit began coughing, his head now covered by the dressing-gown. Martin switched on the light and rushed to the window.

"Go out and call the police!"

"Yes, Martin."

"Damn this window! No—run across to Bert Freeman! Get him out of bed and tell him to find a policeman. Come back here at once!"

"Yes."

"*Go back to your room, Joyce. And you, Mrs. Tibbit!*"

"Mother—Martin says get back to your room."

"Get out of this room, will you! Turn out the light, Mr. Tibbit! *Get out, all of you!*"

A silence. Then a shuffling towards the door.

Would this window never open? His head was pounding, his stomach was sick from the fumes, his heart was sickened by the sight that he had seen.

Mrs. James was lying, her hair in disorder, on the pillow, her hand beneath her chin. Mr. James was lying on his back, on top of the eiderdown, fully dressed. They were both dead.

The window finally opened.

XII

MARTIN RETURNED TO HIS office after the Christmas holidays in a mood of deep reflection. On either side of his tram route, as he rode towards Camberwell Green, he saw glaring news bills announcing the Clapham Tragedy. It seemed the absorbing topic of conversation on his bus. Martin noticed the man sitting in front of him with his newspaper, leaning forward in order to devour each lurid detail made public by Walter Tibbit's volubility on Boxing Day in the saloon bar at the Reindeer, as willing drinks had been pressed upon him by the newspaper reporters. His puny chest had swelled, as his own importance in this drama had become apparent to him. He it was who owned the house of the tragedy, and he it was who had first discovered the bodies. A cigarette had protruded from the corner of his mouth, under his shaggy moustache, as he stood at the bar, addressing his growing audience—his ready-made bow tie attached to his collar stud, his overcoat open, displaying his football medal on its massive gold chain, his drooping bowler hat on the back of his head, wearing the brown cloth spats, which he wore on Sundays and feast-days, a tumbler continuously in his hand. His confidence had grown as the day progressed. He had even introduced a little drama into the telling, describing how, being of a sportive turn of mind, he had gone upstairs to find his copy of *Sporting Life*, which lay on the table in the front room. Of how he had first smelt the gas. Then he had put down his tumbler on to the bar counter, in order to give action to the remainder of his tale.

Martin had rescued him from there, at Mrs. Tibbit's request, to come home and eat a little of the Christmas fare, with which she had unsuccessfully tempted him during the whole of the Christmas holidays. Martin had eventually guided his faltering footsteps homewards towards Linden Terrace and had prevented him from addressing the idle crowd who still stared vacantly at the windows of the first floor. But Walter had given one look to the heavily laden table in his kitchen, only to leave the room hurriedly and be violently sick. It was, as he confided to Martin afterwards, the only occasion in the whole of his sixty-one years that he had never eaten his Christmas dinner.

This morning he was suffering from the results of his excess. Martin had gone into the Tibbits' bedroom on the ground floor before leaving to find Walter lying on his brass bedstead, his grey wisp of hair awry. His face looked strained, and his colour was bad, as he had just been sick again. He lay huddled, shivering in his bedclothes, his body seemingly more wizened without the padding of his embroidered waistcoat, as his fingers twitched nervously at the sheets of the Tibbits' double bed.

"Martin," he had said. "I feel very queer. My stomach's bad. Now all the excitement is over I've got the creeps properly," and his nicotined teeth had chattered violently in his head.

"I'll be home early, Mr. Tibbit," Martin had said.

"Yes. Don't like being alone in this house now. Don't like going up the stairs, either. Keep seeing that poor fellow walking down in his black hat. Thought I saw him just now when I went out to be sick."

"I'll hurry home."

"Yes. I don't think I'll get up till you come home. Rather stay here."

Martin had seen the frightened expression in Walter's eyes, and the deathly pallor of his cheeks. In folding his

newspaper before leaving the tram, Martin again saw Herbert James' photograph, inset into a picture of Number Five Acacia Terrace. His eyes again read Walter Tibbit's name in the newsprint . . . on the front page.

Prior to the arrival of the newspaper reporters, Walter Tibbit had been in a sorry plight. Martin had discovered him, on Christmas morning, standing discreetly behind the lace curtains of his front room as the bodies of Herbert and Maisie James had been carried out on their canvas-hooded stretchers to the waiting ambulance, the windows of the neighbouring houses filled with prying eyes, the pavement filled with idle onlookers. Walter had been unable to speak for a long time, for the tragedy had shocked him deeply. The pathos of the empty larder, which Walter, alone, had seen whilst Bert Freeman was out finding a policeman, had touched the very depths of his soul, and he had hurriedly placed some of the food from his own festive pantry into the James' larder, before Bert Freeman's return, in the hope that that might have some bearing on the verdict. Murder was a horrible word, he had said, and it was the least that he could do for a neighbour. He had confided this subterfuge only to Martin. That empty larder at Christmas-time would have told its own story at the inquest, and you could not just stand by and see a neighbour go under without trying to do something about it, he had said. Walter had therefore commenced, immediately, to build up a most spirited defence against a verdict of suicide. As soon as the police had arrived, he had quickly drawn their attention to the remains of the cold neck of lamb and to the half-drunk bottle of stout, on the kitchen table, the remains of a loaf of bread. The James' Christmas fare was waiting in their larder to be eaten on Christmas Day, he had explained to the Sergeant, to the Constable that Bert Freeman had found at the end of the street and to the Police Surgeon. It *must* have been an accident. He had told them this again and

again. Why, only last week he had caught his own toe against the tap of a gas-fire. Easiest thing in the world to do. The gas companies should really be more careful, putting the taps in such places. And as for Mrs. James being in bed in her nightdress, while Mr. James was in his new togs, on top of the bed—why, that was easy to explain. The poor fellow was working late. He had been for some time now. Being a nice young fellow, as he certainly was, and coming in late, he would not want to wake up his wife by turning on the light. No thoughtful young fellow would want to do that. So poor Mr. James had gone into his bedroom in the dark and had caught his toe against the gas-fire, just the same as he, himself, had done only the week before. Then, feeling queer from the effects, he had had a lie down on the bed. Then, of course, the escaping gas had suffocated him. . . . This story had been told and re-told. It now occupied space on the front page of every newspaper.

Bert Freeman, however, was equally convinced that it was a case of suicide. Mr. George at the Reindeer did not know Herbert James, as he had never been a regular customer there. But he rather tended towards Bert Freeman's view. Any man, in his right senses, would know if he had kicked against a gas-tap, and he would soon smell the gas, in any case, apart from hearing it hiss through the pipe. Of course, if the poor fellow had been drinking, that would be another matter, but if he was not the drinking sort, as it appeared—well, it did look as if Bert Freeman's view must be the right one. . . . Walter Tibbit's earnest pleadings for fair play had affected Martin deeply. Especially when, during a discussion as to the possibility of James' financial position being responsible for the tragedy, Walter had denied vehemently that James was in arrears with his rent.

Paramount in Martin's mind during this time had been his thankfulness that Carol had been away. It would come as a shock to her when she returned in the New Year, but

the closeness to the tragedy would have diminished by then. The James' would have been buried by that time, and the inquest, in which Walter Tibbit was to play such a large part, and for which he was already planning sartorially, would be over. It was for the Tibbits, and for Walter Tibbit in particular, that Martin was chiefly concerned. Walter's eyes had been watery during most of his sober moments of the holiday. On one occasion, Martin had seen a tear trickle slowly down his cheek, only to be wiped away hurriedly on the sleeve of his torn dressing-gown. That a neighbour should be wanting at Christmas-time had struck those unknown depths in his heart which had caused that tear to flow. Therein lay the real tragedy, in Walter's view. His eyes became moist each time he was alone with Martin and could so dwell upon its bitterness.

On arrival at his office, Martin found Peter Thomas with a newspaper spread open on the counter. Peter looked up quickly and frenzied questionings followed. Mr. Hilton, Mr. Brown and Miss Smith quickly joined the circle at the counter, and Norman edged nearer, too. Mr. Drake, when he arrived, found the staff standing in their outdoor clothes, but he, too, was anxious to have first-hand information. By the time that Mr. Thistlewaite arrived, the whole of the staff were standing in a circle near the office door. Martin was then invited into the private room at the back, to give his branch manager a more detailed account of the tragedy. It was not until then that the staff removed their hats and coats and returned to their respective working positions in the office, still whispering amongst themselves, still making mental notes to ask Bowling this or that as soon as he came out from Mr. Thistlewaite's room, and their newspapers were put away reluctantly when Mr. Drake called to Mr. Brown to bring over the post.

The day passed slowly. Martin found it difficult to erase the terrible picture from his mind. In the war he had seen

death, but he had never seen it come to a woman. He remembered his first meeting with Mrs. James on the day of his arrival three months before; of their introduction by Walter in the passage; of her hurrying up the stairs and presently out into the street. He had hardly seen her since that time, except for occasional meetings on the staircase, when they had wished each other "good morning." He had hardly seen Mr. James, either. They had been a mysterious couple always. He began to wonder whether Mrs. Tibbit was not right, after all. She had stressed her "I told you so's" a little strongly after the tragedy, and poor Walter had had a difficult time to make his arguments hold water. She was now convinced that Mr. James was a criminal. If anything, she still leaned towards the theory that he was a cat burglar. He was the right build for that form of crime, she said. She had poured forth calumny on the heads of the dead couple until Walter had had to put his hands to his ears, so painful did he find her cruel jibes. It had been a trying scene to witness, but Walter had explained afterwards that it was only hysteria. Millicent Tibbit's hysteria had always taken that form. Martin had noticed Mrs. Tibbit dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief shortly after this scene and had realized that Millicent Tibbit was of softer mould than she would have it appear. Without saying so to Walter, Martin was gradually inclining towards Mrs. Tibbit's theory, too, although a cat burglar must be a slight exaggeration. Yet there had always been something strange about the James'—their sullen mood, their unfriendliness. Especially this sudden change of attire and, more importantly, James' coming home in the early hours of the morning for these last few months, culminating in a double suicide. . . . Or was it to be *murder* and suicide?

These thoughts ran through Martin's brain as he worked at the counter during the morning, interrupted occasionally by Peter Thomas, who had further questions to ask. How

did the bodies look when he found them? Had they been dead long? Was he sure that no letter had been left behind? Did the police search Mr. James' clothes?

Over lunch, Peter Thomas pressed for further details. The waitress soon learnt of Martin's close connection with the tragedy and she, too, asked gruesome questions in between carrying greasy plates to the marble-topped tables under her control. Like Walter Tibbit, Martin was assuming a new importance. Unlike Walter Tibbit, he resented it deeply. He was anxious only to know what the inquest would disclose and what the verdict would be. Otherwise, he wished to eradicate the picture utterly from his mind. He was longing intensely, now, for the companionship of Carol.

He refused Peter Thomas' suggestion of going to the public-house on the corner to cheer himself up, before going home. He caught the first tramcar, instead, and read in his evening paper that a Mr. Joseph Hake, a butcher in Romford, had claimed Mrs. James as his daughter. There was a photograph showing Mrs. James as a child, wearing a bathing costume and clutching a large doll, on the sands at the seaside. There were graphic details of her childhood, supplied by friends of Maisie Hake—or Mrs. James, as she eventually became. They were at a loss to understand the tragedy. On a recent visit to Romford she had seemed quite happy; there had certainly been no indication of the tragedy that was to come. A Mr. Sidney Davies, a coal merchant of Isleworth, had come forward to say that Herbert James was his nephew, and he, too, could find no answer to this terrible occurrence. He had not seen his nephew for the last few months, but the last time that they had met, his nephew had seemed cheerful enough. There could not, in his view, be any reason for his nephew taking his life. He was devoted to his young wife, whom he had only recently married. They had settled down very comfortably in Linden Terrace,

from all accounts. . . . Martin read these things as his tram rattled along towards Clapham Common. So often he had read of similar tragedies on his way home from work, but they had meant so little to him then. By the time that he had turned over the page he had become engrossed in the next item of news. Those were things that happened to other people; they did not enter into his own little world. To find his own world laid bare on the front page of every newspaper gave him an eerie sense of discomfort. He sat looking out of the window until the tram reached his destination, hearing his fellow-passengers discussing the tragedy on all sides. Then he alighted and walked slowly home across the Common.

On arrival at Number Five, he found Mrs. Tibbit coming out from their bedroom, carrying a tray.

"Just go in the front room, Martin," she whispered, wheezily. "There's some young fellow wants to see Mr. Tibbit. I'm afraid Walter's still very queer. Will you see what he wants?"

Martin removed his overcoat and walked into the front room.

"Good evening," he said, as a young man rose from the arm-chair near the mantelpiece.

"My name's Williams—Laddie Williams."

"Haven't we met before?" Martin asked, puzzled.

"No. Perhaps you've seen me playing in a band somewhere. I'm a saxophonist."

"Oh—do you ever play for the dances at Brown Brothers?"

"Yes. I have played *Gigs* there," Williams said.

"That's where I've seen you, then. Won't you sit down?"

"I only heard about poor Herbie this afternoon. I was playing a dance late last night. Didn't get up till lunch-time. Then I had to play for a children's afternoon Christmas party."

"You knew James well?"

"Yes. Of course, he was older than me, but I'd known him all my life."

"I'm so sorry," Martin said, seeing his visitor's obvious distress.

"Just can't believe it, really," Williams continued, returning again to the arm-chair. "Only saw him just before the holidays," and he sat silently, looking at the greying embers in the grate. "It seems as though I've lost a brother now," he said. "That he should have done a thing like that! If only he had waited!"

"For what, Mr. Williams?"

"For something else to turn up."

"Did he work?"

"Oh, yes—Herbie was in work at the moment. Wasn't doing any too good, though. Fact is, he wasn't really up to it. I got him fixed up in a small cinema down Peckham way."

"As what?"

"Piano-player."

"Piano-player?"

"But Herbie hadn't got it in him. That was the trouble with Herbie. Too old-fashioned, his playing. Still, I got him the job, all the same, but, of course, the manager wasn't satisfied. Good as gave him his notice last week. Herbie didn't tell me that, though. Herbie wasn't like that. I heard it from one of the fellows working with him. So I started looking round again. Just had another job fixed up for him, too," he added, looking again into the fire.

"It must have come as a terrible shock to you."

"Yes. It's knocked me out, really. I always said he was to be my protégé after he entered the business. I was to be his business manager, but I couldn't have done much with poor Herb, I'm afraid. However, it cheered him up."

The embers shifted in the grate. There seemed a sudden chilliness in the room.

"If only I'd known what Herbie was going to do!" Laddie Williams said bitterly.

"Why do you think he did it, Williams?"

"Just lost heart, I suppose. Knew he was no good, really. I used to keep his spirits buoyed up, of course. Let him have some money, too, to set himself up in new clothes, just to give him confidence. He was paying me back weekly, out of his salary. He insisted on doing that. He wasn't earning much, either. Couldn't have had anything over at the end of the week. Still, Herbie was always a proud one. I suppose the reason he gassed himself," Laddie Williams added, still looking into the grate, "was a fear of being dependent on others. Herbie had a dread of that."

"Yes."

Williams blew his nose rather obviously.

"So I just came round," he said, "to know if I could do anything."

"What can you do, Williams? They've taken the poor fellow to the mortuary. They'll keep his body there till the inquest. I know nothing of his private affairs, of course, his furniture and things upstairs. . . ."

"I wasn't thinking of that," Williams said, blowing his nose once more. "That wouldn't be my affair. No, I was thinking of his rent. I knew he was behind with that. Wouldn't like you to be out of pocket. He was my protégé, see?"

Martin was aware of a choking sensation in his throat.

"That's nice of you," he said quietly.

"So, if you'll let me know exactly how he stood with you. . . ."

"But I'm not the landlord, Williams."

"You're not? I'm sorry," he said. "Thought you were. Wouldn't have taken up your time if I'd known."

"My name's Bowling. I live here, too. On the floor above the James'. At least—where they used to live."

"Well, I'm sorry," Williams said. "My mistake."

"No. Mr. Tibbit is the landlord. He's ill. Shock, you know. He asked me to see you."

Laddie Williams rose from the chair.

"Well, you might tell him what I've told you," he said.

"I will."

"And you might thank him for all he did for Herbie. Herb often told me. Behaved very decently over the rent. You'd better have my card."

"Thank you," Martin said, taking the visiting-card. "He'll appreciate your thought—anyway."

"Thanks. Hope we meet in happier circumstances next time."

"Yes."

They were standing up now, facing each other. The embers shifted again in the grate, collapsing entirely.

"Well," Williams said. "I'd better toddle along—if there's nothing I can do."

"I'm afraid there *is* nothing you can do—now, Williams."

A silence fell upon both men, and they stood awkwardly. Williams stooped down suddenly and picked up his instrument case from the floor.

"And you might keep my card, too—in case. I've got a band of my own now, if you're ever wanting anything like that."

"Yes, Williams. I'll remember that."

Again they stood.

"I was thinking of asking if I could have a look at Herbie's rooms. Don't think I will now, though. I'll just toddle along."

"Yes."

"Don't think I could face it, really."

"No."

They shook hands at the door, and Martin stood watching Laddie Williams disappearing slowly up Linden Terrace, the black instrument-case in his hand.

“That’s the house!” he heard a voice exclaim excitedly from the darkness. “That’s where the bloke did it!”

Martin shuddered. Then he closed the front door, bolting it fiercely.

XIII

THE ENGAGEMENT OF JOYCE BOWLING to Stanley Heavitree was announced to the neighbours in Linden Terrace on January 26th, 1921. Stanley Heavitree had telephoned Martin at his office to ask whether he would "partake of a little luncheon" with him, suggesting a half-way meeting-place between Oxford Street and Camberwell Green, so that neither of them should be unduly inconvenienced. Martin had then suggested the Windsor Castle at Victoria.

Martin found Stanley waiting for him on arrival, resplendent in a new cravat, and as Stanley Heavitree was a total abstainer, they had gone straight in to their lunch. Walter Tibbit had taken strong exception to Stanley's teetotalism at the party, although he had afterwards gone so far as to say: "Well, I suppose if a chap *does* suffer from chronic dyspepsia, it can't be helped. Still, those lemonades he keeps pouring down his inside must play havoc with his stomach," and he had shaken his head thoughtfully for a long time.

Stanley Heavitree, at the table, became the perfect host. Martin could have anything he desired. He, personally, would eat just a little boiled fish, as he had to be very careful of what he ate. The entire menu, however, was at Martin's disposal, and the food, he had heard, was excellent here. Being a sunny winter's morning, Martin immediately ordered a hearty lunch, and, before long, Stanley Heavitree had broached the subject so near to his heart, shooting his cuffs in a most professional manner before commencing his long survey of the situation. He explained how Joyce and

he had worked together in Brown Brothers, in the old days. He had noticed her immediately, her never-failing good nature; her splendid loyalty; her cleverness in dealing with difficult customers, many of whom insisted upon being served by her at the counter; her popularity with the staff; her healthy outlook on life; the broadness of her vision. He enlarged upon these things whilst waiting for his fish. When his fish arrived, he drew nearer to his climax. He had felt, as he had already explained so fully, a most genuine and wholesome admiration for Joyce from the very moment he made her acquaintance in the department. It was not until one evening, and if he remembered rightly, it was the very evening that the Bowlings' move had been made to Linden Terrace, that any possibility of a more intimate relationship between them had entered his mind. It had happened in a most curious way, too. He had been very concerned, at that time, about a certain stock of printed chiffons, which were not selling. Joyce had come to him that evening with a most helpful and sensible suggestion, and on his way home that night he had become deeply impressed by her thought for him. Although he had seen the underwear buyer, Mr. Samuels, the next morning, and Joyce's suggestion had been adopted, it had not, unfortunately, borne the fruit that they had both hoped. In fact, he added, coughing discreetly into his starched cuff and drawing from it his pocket handkerchief, the failure of not selling off that large stock of printed chiffons had been responsible for the termination of his association with the famous Streatham store. Nevertheless, he had been deeply grateful for Joyce's concern for him at that time, and, of course, since he had left Brown Brothers, their acquaintance, away from the fetters of business, had been renewed with a greater freedom. This acquaintanceship had now blossomed into a deeper understanding. In fact, before actually speaking to Mrs. Bowling, he would be happy,

indeed, to know Martin's reaction to the suggestion that he should one day become his brother-in-law. Stanley Heavittree then commenced to eat his fish.

Martin welcomed this news for three reasons. It had been obvious for a long time that Stanley Heavittree was equally the man of Joyce's choice, and Joyce's happiness meant a great deal to Martin and he rejoiced whole-heartedly, raising his tankard of beer to drink to their happiness. Yet Martin was selfishly glad also. Since Carol had returned from Budapest, he had not broached the subject that he had so carefully planned in her absence, although he had endeavoured, on various occasions, to find courage to speak to her. Driving back in the Underground from Victoria station after he and Walter Tibbit had met Carol's train, he had felt strangely shy, and the words that he had planned to say did not come. Carol, on the other hand, seemed further from his reach than ever. It had discouraged him greatly. He had wondered whether the warmth of his welcome on the railway platform had, in any way, been lacking. Seeing Carol alight from her carriage that evening had been the most beautifully exciting thing that he had ever known. But the closeness to the James tragedy, culminating so recently with his presence at the inquest, had partially removed his spontaneity. That may have been the primary cause. He had discussed it, psychologically, with Peter Thomas. "Well," Peter had said. "I expect it's all very simple. She just finds Clapham dull after a place like Budapest. Anyone would." And this remark had added to Martin's concern. Feeling discomforted, he became aware, too, that he was not appearing at his best, and he found it difficult to behave naturally in her presence. His remarks seemed strident and out of place. The divine feeling of companionship seemed to be slipping away and they seemed to grow even more distant as the days passed by. And Carol had never seemed so desirable. She had returned from Budapest looking more radiant than

ever. Her laugh had never sounded so enchanting, and her smile had never thrilled Martin more. But the little intimacies had gone. Carol did not take his arm any more. She did not suggest going for walks on the Common. Although she was not working late at the office, she would bring work home with her now and spend her evenings in her bedroom, where she could not be disturbed.

At first, Martin had wondered whether the James tragedy could be responsible, for the news had come as a great shock to her. She had not been told about it until Walter, who had insisted upon carrying her suitcase from the station, had opened the front door of their house and a reunion had taken place with her mother in the kitchen downstairs. Then Walter had broken the news, stressing the unfairness of bringing in a verdict of Murder against the poor fellow. It had, of course, been a very sad home-coming for her and she had gone almost immediately to her room. Although life in Linden Terrace was gradually returning to normal, there was no question of the sadness which still hung over the inhabitants of Number Five. Walter was inconsolable, still. Of course, the announcement of Joyce's engagement might reawaken his old spirit, which should help to retrieve some of the happy atmosphere of the past. . . . This was the second reason that made Martin raise his tankard and drink so warmly to Stanley Heavitree.

The third reason that he rejoiced over this engagement was, perhaps, the most important in his mind, and he was aware that this should not be so. Yet his love for Carol was all-absorbing. There seemed no other happening in the world beside this. Even the news that his host, who was now carefully boning his fish and eating it with such refined delicacy, was to marry his sister, seemed quite unimportant beside his own affairs. Stanley could never feel about Joyce as he did about Carol. Poor Joyce's figure was atrocious, anyway. Stanley could never know the thrills that he knew.

Stanley and Joyce's love could never be an exciting one. It would just be a domestic happiness at Putney, with Stanley's child, and perhaps a family of their own at a later date. But this engagement gave him the loophole he craved. He could listen more attentively to Preston Daley's suggestions now.

"I really am delighted, Stanley," he said. "May yours be a long and happy life together."

Stanley replaced his fish knife and fork tidily on to his plate, pushing the bones carefully to one side.

"Thank you, Martin," he said. "I hope one day I may have the pleasure of wishing you the same, and with as good a wife as Joyce."

"Yes—I hope so, too."

Then they began discussing a suitable date for the wedding. Stanley saw no reason for a long engagement; both their minds were now made up and, as he already owned the little house in Putney, and Joyce, chaperoned by Emily Jones, had been over, and had expressed herself as delighted with the locality generally, and with the furnishing in particular, he saw no reason for delaying the wedding. Martin agreed. He would not delay his own wedding one single moment after *he* became engaged.

They parted after lunch with renewed good wishes for their respective futures and Martin, at the Clock Tower at Victoria, caught his tram back to Camberwell Green, in high spirits. Destinies were being shaped! Joyce was to be married. Preston was urging the acceptance of a position in his father's New York Office, and the commencing salary was to be the equivalent of eight hundred pounds a year! Of course, living was a very expensive item in New York, but still, eight hundred pounds a year was more than Mr. Thistlewaite earned, apart from his commission! This gave Martin a warm feeling of content. Preston had pointed out that he must not imagine himself a millionaire on that salary,

as it really represented very little in America. It was only a start. He felt sure that Martin would get on quickly, for promotion was rapid in the States for the ambitious. But then, Preston could not be expected to understand the financial side of his life. Martin had just had his salary raised by the Atlantic to two hundred pounds a year and Mr. Drake had taken the first opportunity of pointing out how extremely fortunate he was! Fortunate! Wait till I tell him about the eight hundred a year, Martin thought! And the joy, too, of getting away from the office in Camberwell Green. There was no denying that. He had never been happy there. He realized that. Ever since his transfer from Head Office he had been aware of the pin-pricks from Mr. Drake. In the old days, Martin had accepted those pin-pricks as the lot of a junior clerk, for it was the privilege of the chief clerk to make his life unbearable. But since knowing Preston and Carol he had emerged from that stage. He resented it deeply now. It was unnecessary, small, niggardly and typical of the attitude of these small men. They were not used to authority, and when it came to them, they abused it. He had noticed that in the war, too. The more temporary the gentleman's commission, the more ill-mannerly his attitude towards his men. A regular officer's first thought had always been for his men's comfort. It was easy to be rude if you were in a position of authority. It was easy for the rich man to be rude to the less fortunate ones. The *real* rich man—the man who was worthy of his riches—made the less fortunate feel immediately at their ease—and helped them, too, like Preston Daley. But the Preston Daleys and the Drakes of the world were the difference between a race-horse and one pulling a dust-cart. The simile, in itself, was apt. Mr. Drake meant nothing in the scheme of things, and his very awareness of the situation made him adopt this attitude of niggardly pin-pricking, to keep Martin continuously aware of the difference in their status. But Martin's schemes

were shaping. If all went well, he would be leaving all that soon.

Martin jumped off the tram at the nearest stop and walked happily back to his office. He was looking forward to seeing Joyce when he arrived home, and they must have a celebration that very evening. Walter Tibbit would be highly delighted. This was the first really big event of the New Year. If only this would remove the gloom at home! Not even the bracelet that he had given Carol when she returned from Budapest had drawn them any closer. There was always this strange reserve now, and he felt it keenly. But he would see to all that in due course. His dress-suit had arrived, and with the remaining few pounds from his War Savings he was going to give Carol a *real* party. They were first going to dine at the Savoy Grill, he had decided, in that corner table overlooking the courtyard. They were then going to the theatre and were going to sit in the stalls. Then, at Preston's suggestion, they were going to the Berkeley, where they would have supper, and they would dance there until two o'clock, when a taxi would drive them all the way home to Linden Terrace. This was Martin's new plan and its planning had taken place in the quiet of many nights, with the bedclothes pulled tightly around his head, as the wind had blown against the blind in his room and the rain had beaten fiercely against the window-panes. This was the only way to remove this atmosphere of strangeness between them. He could tell her everything at the Savoy.

He arrived at his office whistling a song, and walked to the cloakroom, where he hung up his overcoat and felt hat. He brushed his hair with the few remaining bristles of the office brush and returned to the counter to tell Peter Thomas of Joyce's engagement, which came as a great surprise to Peter, who had never heard of Stanley Heavitree. Peter Thomas knew most things that happened in Martin's life, but Martin had never mentioned Heavitree over their daily

lunch-table. Martin had, therefore, to give Peter a long résumé of Stanley's activities before and after recommencing his afternoon's work on the counter.

"Well, I hope they'll be happy," Peter Thomas said. "Sounds a suitable match."

"Yes."

There was only one other matter that Martin had omitted to tell Peter, and that was the possibility of his joining the Daley Steamship Company in New York. No one had been told about that possibility. No one would be told either, until he had spoken to Carol, because his own future depended upon Carol's attitude, for she might not care to live in America. He could not go otherwise; he realized that. But Carol had defined her feelings quite openly at the party over a month before. When they had been sent downstairs by Mrs. Tibbit to join the others in the front room, she had taken Martin into a corner, as they drank their coffee. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Martin," she had said. . . . If only he had then met Preston, he would have told her the great news. It would have been the psychological moment. He realized that, for never before had they been attuned to such perfect harmony. . . .

The afternoon wore slowly on. Save for a clash with Mr. Drake shortly after his return from lunch, the office hours passed uneventfully that day. That clash had been of short duration, too. Martin tolerated no argument over the mislaid Basingstoke file. It had *not* passed through his hands. And Martin realized how this possibility of eight hundred pounds a year in America had stiffened his backbone, in the same way as his introduction of the insurances on Preston's car and his personal effects. At 5 p.m. to the minute, he put down his pen, and took his soap and towel to the cloak-room, to emerge a few moments later, dressed for the street.

"Ah——" Mr. Drake said, looking up from his raised

desk in the centre of the room, and removing his pince-nez. "So the office clock-watcher is off—eh?"

Martin walked slowly up to Mr. Drake's desk.

"It may surprise you," he said, speaking very loudly, so that all the office might hear, "but I have an appointment with Mr. Preston Daley. He has some business to discuss with me, which would give you an even bigger surprise if you knew! Good night!" and Martin allowed the drawer of his desk to close with unnecessary noise, when putting away his soap and towel. Then, with a "Good night" to Peter Thomas, whose eyebrows were raised, but who winked playfully through his magnifying spectacles, Martin walked out of the office, turned to the right, down the steps and out into the street, catching the first bus going north. Poor old Drake, he thought, as he climbed up the steps of the bus. He would soon get tired of baiting him, finding that it had so little effect. Bullies always did. He sat at the front, and when the conductor came, he booked to Hyde Park Corner. Poor old Drake! One day he would give him the surprise of his life! The poor, miserable, weak-kneed sidesman who, on Sundays, carried round the collection plate in his local church with a sanctimonious air, and bullied his staff with narrow-minded bigotry for the remainder of the week! Martin breathed in the fresh night air as it beat against his face from the open bus-top. Poor old Drake! Finding, by the clock at Hyde Park Corner, that it was only twenty minutes past five, he decided to walk to the Porchester Club, just as he had done on that foggy day some weeks before, for his appointment with Preston was not until five-thirty.

He walked briskly along Piccadilly in a most happy frame of mind. Everything was working according to plan, and it was good to know that into his own plan came Joyce's happiness, too. They must really celebrate this engagement to-night. Meanwhile, he had to see Preston, and he knew why: Preston wanted an answer. An interview was to be

arranged with Preston's father as soon as Martin had made up his mind, and his decision must not be long delayed. But he would discuss all this with Preston over a Manhattan in his Club in a few minutes now.

On arrival at the Porchester Club, he was led into the cloakroom by the same page-boy who had taken him there on the occasion of his first visit, and he found himself admiring his striped suit in the mirror, as he again washed his hands, thinking how well the suit was keeping its shape after daily use. But that, of course, was due to going to a good tailor and having the suit specially made. Then he was led into the smoking-room, and presently he saw Preston sitting in an arm-chair by the fireplace, his suède shoes on the fender seat, lying back in his chair talking to another man. As Martin walked across, Preston noticed him and smiled a friendly welcome.

"Hello, young Martin," he said, and then, glancing up at the clock, he added: "Punctuality, everyone tells me, is a very necessary quality. Do you know Faulkner?"

"Hello!" a tall dark man said, also smiling his greeting. "Draw up a chair."

"My name's Bowling," Martin said.

"Oh—sorry! Tim Faulkner—Martin Bowling. Draw up a chair, Martin," and Preston removed his feet from the fender stool. "What'll you drink?" he asked, getting up to press a bell.

"A Manhattan, thank you."

"Tomkins. A Manhattan, a pink gin, and a dry Martini."

"What's it like out?" Faulkner asked.

"Oh—quite nice. The air is quite fresh."

"I'd better go out and breathe some soon, I suppose," Faulkner said, a trifle gloomily.

"How's business, Martin?" Preston asked, returning to his chair, his feet again returning to the fender seat.

"Oh—fine, thanks."

"Been thinking any more over that little matter?"

"Yes, Preston, I have."

"What was the answer to a maiden's prayer?" Faulkiner asked thoughtfully. "Do you happen to know? Preston and I have just been arguing."

"No—er—I'm afraid I don't."

"Was it some quotation, or something?"

"Well, I believe it was part of a poem, or something like that. I'm afraid I don't know, though."

"Pity. I think it was part of a rude story, but blessed if I can remember it," and Faulkiner reclined into the depths of his arm-chair, Martin sitting upright in a smaller edition of the same chair, in the centre, facing the fire.

"How's Carol?"

"Fine—thanks, Preston. By the way, my sister is engaged."

"Really? Who to?"

"A man called Heavitree."

"Well, if there's any celebrating to do, my lad, let's start now," Faulkiner said, moving forward in his chair. "I'm just looking for something to celebrate. Did you order doubles, Preston?"

"No. But we'll order again."

"Good!" and Faulkiner returned once more into the depths of his arm-chair.

"So your sister's engaged, Martin. Rather a romantic family, yours—eh?" and Preston smiled again. "Is he a good fellow?"

"Oh, yes—very. Older than she is, of course."

"That's the way it should be, Tim, isn't it?"

"What?"

"The man should always be much older than the woman."

"You leave Babs alone!" Faulkiner grunted from his arm-chair. "She's all right. Besides, I like widows. It saves a lot of trouble."

The club waiter arrived then with their drinks.

"Well, here's to the bride," Tim said.

"And here's to you, Martin," Preston smiled, draining his cocktail in one gulp.

Martin held his glass in his hand for a moment. Then he said:

"Your health."

"You're wanted on the telephone, sir," a page announced, deferentially.

"Who is it?" Tim asked.

"A lady, sir."

"Yes—but *which* lady?"

"She didn't say, sir."

"Well, go and ask her. I can't go talking indiscriminately to any woman who cares to telephone me. You ought to know that by now, young fellow."

"Right, sir."

"But if it's Mrs. Mornington-Fisher, I'm in," Tim called round the corner of his chair. "But I'm not in the Club to anyone else to-day."

The page-boy smiled discreetly, and departed through the door into the hall.

"That's the worst of this place, my boy," Tim explained to Martin. "If you're not careful they always run you to earth here."

Preston laughed.

"The sins of the summer keep finding you out," he said.

"Ever been to Monte?" Tim asked.

"No—I haven't," Martin replied.

"Don't go. They're *leeches*!" and Tim drained the remnants of his pink gin.

"Mrs. Mornington-Fisher, sir," the page announced, returning.

"Right," Tim said, jumping to his feet and placing the empty glass on the shelf. "Just coming!" Then he dabbed his

coat-front with a handkerchief, removing some pink gin from the lapel, and left the smoking-room hurriedly.

"Well, what's the decision, Martin?"

"Well, I'd like to talk to you about it, Preston. It's rather difficult to talk here. I mean . . ."

"Oh—don't worry. Tim will be *hours*. He always is when it's Babs. We've plenty of time."

Martin began nervously. He wished that they had been talking elsewhere. He found the atmosphere of the Porchester Club a little overpowering, but he explained his position all the same, sipping his Manhattan between the gaps in his disjointed story. He was more appreciative of Preston's interest in him than he could say. It meant everything to him, a chance like that; to get him out of the rut; to put him on his feet; to place him on a plateau from which mountains could be climbed. That was his one thought, now. But there was Carol. It was a weak confession to make, but Carol *was* his life. There could be no life without her, now. He was afraid that Preston might be shocked by this confession, but he would rather forgo this wonderful opportunity than lose her, for she was all that he had. She might not want to go to America, so he must speak to her first. Could the matter remain over for a day or so? Oh, it couldn't. . . . Well, he must talk to Carol to-night, then. Why had he not mentioned it to her before? Well, that terrible suicide in their house. It had unnerved all of them. Everyone was behaving abnormally. Everyone was on edge, nervy, depressed, ill-at-ease and distorted in mind. A terrible thing, a suicide. On Christmas Day, too. Yes, he would talk to Carol to-night—when he got home. He was terribly sorry to have appeared so discourteous, so ungrateful. Maybe, the conditions in his house had been largely responsible for his manners, too. He would telephone Preston to-morrow.

"That's all right, Martin," Preston said, as he noticed

Tim Faulkner reappearing. "Only the job is there. How long it will be open, I can't say. Try and let me know to-morrow."

"I will, Preston. I will."

"Come on, little man," Tim said, beckoning with his forefinger. "Out of that chair! The 'lovelies' are collected. The gramophone is playing. And there's Vodka!"

"So she's taken to that—eh?" Preston said, laughingly. "All right. Have another drink, Martin, before you go?"

"No, thanks, Preston."

"So it seems that Bacchus is calling, then?"

"And Aphrodite," Tim added, leeringly. "Come, my little man, Angela is round there, too," and Tim's forefinger still beckoned wickedly.

Preston rose from his arm-chair and stretched himself, laughingly.

"Don't take any notice of Tim," he said. "No one ever does. Not even Babs."

He took them, then, by the arm and led them from the smoking-room, as Tim enlarged, with lurid details, on the happenings at that moment in Mrs. Mornington-Fisher's flat in Chapel Street. After collecting their hats and coats, they walked into the street. Preston hailed a taxi in Piccadilly, and Martin caught a bus at the Ritz.

He had been wrong, he realized, as he rode along. He had been very wrong. He had felt ashamed in making his explanation to Preston just now, but he must talk to Carol to-night, without further delay. It was a pity about the party that he had planned at the Savoy, but that must come afterwards. Perhaps, now, there would be a double announcement to make this very evening. . . . Carol was arriving home about half-past five these days, and he would go to her directly he arrived home, and would take her to his room, away from the others. Mrs. Tibbit could not mind that, now, since they, too, were to be engaged in so

short a time. He ought to have proposed to Carol the very moment that she returned from Budapest, and be hanged to this damned atmosphere! It was ridiculous to allow it to interfere with their happiness like this. Carol had told him, at the party, how much he meant to her. Perhaps it was his very ungallantry that had made her so restrained in her manner towards him since her return. He laughed aloud to himself. Of course! That must be the very reason, he thought. What a fine lover I am! I just don't know the first thing about women. But I see it now! I have been rude, insulting, ungallant. When a girl goes as far as to *tell* a man how she feels about him, and he then ignores her, well—a woman has every reason to feel slighted. And she is not going to run the risk of being slighted again. Obviously. He laughed to himself again. Really, he must quickly make amends. A lucky thing that Preston had asked for a decision to-morrow. He would buy Carol some flowers on the way home. And some for Joyce, too, in celebration of her own happiness. He had seventeen shillings in his pocket and there was a shop near the Common that remained open until quite late, so he would call in there. As his bus drew nearer to Clapham Common, his spirits rose. He would stand by the fireplace in his room, just as they had done on the night of the party. Perhaps it would be as well to light the gas-fire. It would be warmer and more in keeping with his mood. He would light that small standard lamp, with the Chinese shade, the one Joyce had given him for Christmas; it only needed fixing into the bulb socket on the hanging light and changing the bulb. The light would then be softer and more in keeping. He had better go upstairs and arrange all this first. Then he would go downstairs to the Tibbits' kitchen and knock on Carol's door. . . . A picture arose vividly before his eyes. A figure bending over the doormat to pick up the morning's mail. Turning. Smiling. A lithe figure, just like the Shepperson drawing that had first

made him aware of sex. Carol! He had loved her then—at their first meeting. He realized that now. . . . He reached his destination, and hurriedly entered the florist's and bought two dozen red roses, which he had made into two bunches, and he inscribed cards to each, which he placed carefully inside their paper wrappings. On Joyce's he wrote: *Stanley is a great fellow. Congratulations, Joyce. Martin.* On Carol's he wrote: *A belated welcome home. Come up and have a talk in my room this evening. I'll be waiting. Martin.* Then he walked home across the Common, a bunch of flowers in each hand. The flowers would be a much more artistic invitation than knocking at her door. He would ask Walter to take them down to Carol's room directly he arrived.

He opened the front door, his heart beating rapidly beneath his new overcoat, to find Walter Tibbit standing in the hall, reading the evening paper, under the mistletoe, which still hung from the hall light.

"Good evening, Martin," he said, gloomily. "Never rains but it pours. Seen the evening paper?"

"No."

"The railway crash on the Continent?"

"Where?"

"Can't pronounce the name of the place. But poor Mr. Severn's in it. He's in the list of killed."

"Mr. Severn!"

"Yes, poor chap. No details. His name is in the stop press, though. Partner in Severn & Browning. Can't be a mistake. Look!"

Martin leant hurriedly over and read the name, printed in bold type on the right-hand side of the paper.

"Seemed a nice chap, didn't he, too?"

"He certainly did," Martin said, still clutching his two bunches of flowers.

"Terrible for the wife, isn't it? Seemed quite a nice

woman. You remember her, at the station? Dressed up in furs?"

"Yes."

"Now he, poor chap, is gone, like poor Mr. James."

"Yes."

"Can't help feeling sorry for his poor wife."

"I expect it will be a blow for Carol, too. Where is she?"

"She hasn't come home yet. Bound to be late at the office now, I suppose, with cables and such-like. But it's just seven o'clock," he added, looking at his watch, "so she shouldn't be long."

"I thank you all," Stanley Heavitree said. "I thank you sincerely. And you, sir, for your kind words. On behalf of Miss Bowling—er—Joyce, I should say—and myself—I thank you."

"Well spoken, sir—well spoken!" Walter Tibbit replied, retrieving his glass from beside the granite clock on the mantelpiece, as polite applause broke out in the downstairs front sitting-room. "Let us drink once more to the happy pair. Come, charge your glasses, ladies and gentlemen!" So saying, he drained off his own glass without further ado, and replaced it on to the mantelpiece behind him, wiping his shaggy moustache with the back of his hand. "As nice a drop of whisky as I remember," he remarked, smacking his lips. "Tastes like pre-war to me."

"It *is* pre-war," Bert Freeman answered. "When you sent over, that's all I had in the house. Still, it's an occasion, Walter. Your health, Mr. Heavitree."

Stanley Heavitree, standing beside Joyce in her green taffeta frock, bowed politely.

"Well, when's the wedding?" Bert asked, noticing that there was still something left in the bottom of his tumbler.

Stanley looked demurely at Joyce before replying.

"Well," he said, "that has to be decided, Mr. Freeman. Our little nest is ready. As soon as this little lady says the word."

"That's the idea! Hope all your troubles will be little ones," Bert said, draining the last dreg.

"I thank you, sir. I would like to return that compliment."

"Sure you wouldn't like a little drop of something?"

"No thank you, Mr. Tibbit. I have already exceeded my allowance with that glass of port wine."

Walter sniffed rather loudly. Then he turned away.

"Well," he said, "it's made a nice little change, anyway. First engagement we've celebrated in this house."

"What! You've never had an engagement here before, Mr. Tibbit?"

Walter turned.

"No, Joyce," he said. "First one."

"Isn't it time Carol was home," Martin asked.

Walter Tibbit looked at his watch.

"A quarter to ten," he mused. "Yes, she certainly should be home by now. Still, I expect she's got plenty to do to-night, cables and so on. Sad, wasn't it, Bert, about poor Mr. Severn?"

"It was that, Walter. Did you know him?"

"Oh—I knew him all right!" Walter replied, his puny chest expanding. "Why, the last time we had a conversation together, he turned to me and said, 'Mr. Tibbit,' he said, 'not only are the railways comfortable to travel in, but they're *safe*!' His very words, Bert! Just before he left, too!"

"Yes, it only goes for to show," Bert replied, thoughtfully. "You can never be sure of anything, Walter. Here to-day—gone to-morrow. That's the way it is. A fellow in the brewery was killed last week, trying to hop on to a tram while it was moving. He'd just got over the influenza, too. But he tried to hop on to a tram as it was moving and he had

to fall and hit the back of his skull on the roadway. Been all through the war, too, without a scratch."

"Yes—it's funny, Bert. Still, as I always says, it isn't so much the poor fellow who passes on who I'm sorry for. It's for the ones who're left behind. This Mr. Severn, for example. Quite a nice wife he had. Two kids, too. It'll be hard on the poor woman and no mistake."

"It will be that, Walter. It'll be a big shock to her, I expect."

"Sure to. Expecting him home the day after to-morrow, she was, too."

Bert Freeman shook his head sadly.

"Well, I hope," he said, "that she'll find consolation. Maybe she'll find it in the kids, the same as I did."

"Yes, you certainly were fortunate in having them, Bert."

A silence fell upon the room. Millicent Tibbit was sitting on the upholstered arm-chair next the fire. Stanley Heavitree and Joyce were standing by the sideboard. Walter Tibbit was standing with his back to the fire, leaning now against the mantelpiece. Bert Freeman was sitting on the edge of the table. Martin was standing near the door.

"Hadn't we better telephone Carol?" Martin asked, biting his lip thoughtfully.

"I shouldn't worry to do that, Martin," Millicent replied, wheezing noticeably. "Carol knows her way about all right. As Mr. Tibbit said, I expect they'll be working late in her office to-night. Cables and such-like, about the poor fellow. Such a nice fellow he was, Bert. No airs about him. Seems sad, doesn't it? And that poor woman widowed now, with two children," and Millicent Tibbit looked into the fire. "I think," she said, "I'll have another little drop, Walter. My spirits seem to get very low these days, somehow."

"That's the idea, Mother! Mr. Heavitree, be so kind as to pass over the siphon. Thank you!"

"I think I'll telephone all the same," Martin said, still biting his lip.

"Well, please yourself, Martin. There's no need to worry, though. She has been home later than this before. Thank you, Walter. Not too much soda. Don't drown it, now! Thank you."

"Another, Bert?"

Bert Freeman looked up from the frayed Axminster carpet.

"Yes," he answered more quietly than was his wont. "I'll just have one for the road."

"Well, you've been through it, Bert. You should understand what it means to that poor woman."

"Yes, Walter. Steady! That's enough. Thank you," and Bert Freeman took the proffered glass, still sitting on the edge of the table.

"Shall I come with you, Martin?"

"No, Joyce. I shan't be a minute."

Martin ran up the stairs and collected his felt hat and overcoat, and hurried down the stairs into the street. The question was, where to telephone. Everything was closed down now, except the Underground Station, and that would be a long walk. He decided to go to the Reindeer. He turned to the right, by the Church at the top of the street, and entered the Saloon Bar three minutes later.

"Good evening Mr. Bowling. I hear your sister's engaged. Congratulations!"

"News travels, Mr. George. Yes, she seems very happy. May I use your telephone?"

"Certainly! You know the way. There isn't a box there. Ask for the number and pay as you go out."

"Thanks."

Martin passed through the Saloon Bar and noticed Mr. George busy at the counter. He arrived at the telephone in the alcove of the Saloon and he looked up Severn &

Browning in the telephone directory. Presently he was asking for the number.

"There's no reply," a voice said, a moment later.

"Are you *sure*?"

"I'll try another line."

"Thanks."

Martin saw Mr. George pulling a head on to the beer as he drew it and serving it finally at the bar counter, with consummate artistry. He noticed him turning a tap beneath a bottle of spirits, which was hung neck downwards, and measuring a double or a single according to the order, before producing a small bottle of mineral water from beneath the counter, or placing a siphon by the side of the neat spirit in its tumbler, as he turned to the next customer.

"Oh—there's no reply?"

Martin replaced the receiver, and stood undecidedly.

"There was no answer," he explained, passing through the Saloon Bar a moment later, noticing the Christmas decorations still festooned on top of the array of bottles behind Mr. George's head.

"Then there's nothing to pay, Mr. Bowling." Mr. George smiled.

"Thanks. Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Bowling."

Martin walked hurriedly home. On arrival, he found that Bert Freeman had already left, and that Joyce and Stanley Heavitree had gone upstairs to talk to his mother.

"There's no reply, Mr. Tibbit."

"No reply?"

"No."

"Well, I suppose the operator has gone off duty," Millicent Tibbit volunteered, holding an empty glass as she sat over the fire.

"Well, it's gone ten, Mother," Walter said, looking again at his watch. "She shouldn't be as late as this, you know."

"I feel anxious," Martin said.

"Never feel anxious about Carol," Millicent Tibbit wheezed, pulling up her skirt to warm her knees and showing an expanse of red flannel petticoat. "*Her* head is screwed on all right, young man. She's bound to be busy at the office to-night."

"Still, it's five past ten."

"Well, sit down, Martin, and we'll just have another little toast to your sister's engagement. There's no need to worry, as Mother says. Say when!"

"When!" Martin hurriedly replied, as Walter Tibbit poured generously from Bert Freeman's pre-war bottle of Scotch whisky.

Martin drew up a chair before the fire, at Walter's invitation, and he sat between Walter and Millicent, listening to a discussion upon the uncertainties of life. Poor Mr. Severn! The late Vicar had died in his sleep, shortly before Martin had moved in. That was the curious thing about death; you never knew when it would come to you. Like the Vicar and poor Mr. Severn. Who would have thought that Mr. Severn, in the prime of life, would have been killed so tragically, especially after remarking, just before leaving for this trip, on the safety of travelling by rail. No, it was very sad indeed. Perhaps Carol would have some more details. . . . Mr. Heavitree's name entered into the conversation, also. He seemed a nice enough fellow. A pity he suffered so with his digestion. But still, he seemed to be doing very nicely in his business. And it was very nice for Joyce to have a ready-made home to move into. This had started an argument; Millicent Tibbit did not agree. A woman should build her own home. It was not right for a young married girl to start life in a home designed by her husband's deceased wife. Walter argued, drawing attention to Joyce's own words when she had praised, beyond all shadow of a doubt, the decoration of Stanley's house in Putney. "It's beautiful,"

Joyce had said. "Just my idea of what a home should be." How could Millicent argue after that? But Millicent, her spirits failing fast, had been revived again by Bert Freeman's pre-war whisky and the argument had started anew and with greater vigour.

"It's a quarter past eleven," Martin said, watching the granite clock on the mantelpiece, surrounded by Millicent's collection of Goss china.

"So it is, Martin," and Walter cocked his head to one side and held it there as he looked thoughtfully at his watch. "Carol's late and no mistake," and he replaced his watch into his waistcoat pocket.

At that moment Stanley Heavitree entered, leading Joyce by the hand.

"I'm just off, ladies and gents," he said, "and I would like to thank you for your hospitality. Very much enjoyed by all, I'm sure."

"Oh—quite a pleasure, Mr. Heavitree." Millicent Tibbit beamed benignly from the arm-chair.

"Sure you wouldn't like one for the road?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Tibbit. I am already quite light-headed from the port wine," and Stanley began to giggle.

"And I'm just seeing Stanley to the top of the road," Joyce said, taking his arm.

"Right! Thanks for the lunch to-day," Martin said.

"Next time *you'll* do the talking—eh?" and Stanley giggled again. "Good night, all," he said.

"Good night."

The front door closed.

"I believe he *is* a bit light-headed," Walter confided. "Surprising, isn't it?" and he sniffed again. "Only one glass, too!"

"Yes. But if he's not used to it, Walter."

"His blood looks very thin to me. Looks as though he needs building up. Still, I suppose he'll make a good husband. Doing very nicely at Benskin's from all accounts."

When Joyce returned from the top of the road, Stanley Heavitree was still the subject under discussion. To change it, Walter began whistling *The Chocolate Soldier* as he heard the front door open, his hands in his trousers pockets as he sat in his arm-chair. "See Stanley off all right? Nice fellow!"

"He is, indeed," Joyce said warmly. And then: "Are you coming to bed, Martin?"

"No. I'll wait up for Carol."

"Well, it's half-past eleven."

"I know. I'll wait all the same."

"Right! Good night. And thank you, Mrs. Tibbit, for arranging this little party. Stanley was so appreciative."

"Not at all, dear. Very pleased to have him. I hope you're going to be happy with him."

"Yes, Joyce," Walter said. "So do I. First engagement to be announced in this house, too. Good omen!"

Joyce smiled.

"I hope so," she said, and closed the door happily.

"It's five-and-twenty to twelve," Martin said.

"So it is," Walter agreed, frowning thoughtfully. "She's never been as late as this, Mother."

"And no answer from her office."

"Well," Millicent Tibbit pointed out, "that might easily be, as I said, with the operator gone. Still, she oughtn't to be as late as this, Walter. I'm getting quite anxious myself, now."

"So am I," Martin said.

"Well, what can we do?" Walter asked, rising from his chair, the frown still on his forehead. He parted the curtains and lifted a section of the Venetian blinds and peered through. "It's a clear night. No fog."

"Still, as Martin says, she shouldn't be as late as this, Walter."

"No."

"Let's do something!" Martin exclaimed. "Don't let us just *sit!*"

Walter, surprised by Martin's outburst, turned from the Venetian blind.

"What can we do, Martin?" he asked again. "We can only wait up. Nothing else we can do."

"There must be *something* we can do!"

Walter's frown grew deeper.

"Well, Martin," he said, "there's only one thing to do when you can't find anyone, and that's to go to the police."

"We don't call in no police, Walter!" Mrs. Tibbit cried from the arm-chair. "We've seen enough of *them* lately to last us for a lifetime."

"Well, Mother, I'm only trying to explain that there's nothing we *can* do."

"I'm going to the City," and Martin rose quickly from his chair.

"What's the good of going there, Martin? The office will be closed up if there's no answer."

"I'm going—anyway!"

"I'll come with you," Walter said, following him.

"You'll stay here, Walter!"

Martin walked quickly into the hall, picked up his felt hat and new overcoat from the hall stand and left the house, putting on his coat on the way. If he hurried he would be in time to catch an Underground train. He ran across the Common, buttoning his coat, and choosing the same path that Carol took each morning, pausing in his run when he saw someone approaching. But it was never Carol. He arrived breathlessly at the Underground Station and booked to Cannon Street, and sat in the train listening to the noises of the wheels and the roar of the train as it rushed through the tunnel. It was now past midnight.

He changed at Charing Cross and caught the first train going east. He hurried from Cannon Street Station, and found himself, at last, outside the offices of Severn & Browning, which were in darkness. The large oak door was

securely locked. He searched for the night bell, which he rang fiercely, keeping his finger on the button. A policeman passed. Questionings. Explanations. The door was eventually opened by the night watchman, necessitating further explanations. No, there was no one in the building. Miss Tibbit? Yes, he knew Miss Tibbit. Secretary to the boss. No, he had not actually *seen* her leave, but the place was empty. He was just going round the building again. That was why he had been so long answering the bell. Well, if the policeman would not mind accompanying them, as he did not know this young gentleman, he would certainly take them upstairs to see. But there was no light on anywhere in the building. Miss Tibbit's room was in front. If they would be so good as to walk across the road, he would point out Miss Tibbit's room. On the second floor—look! The window on the extreme left. It was in darkness, as he had said. No one was working there. Still, if the young gentleman insisted, he could come up and have a look round, so long as the policeman would not mind accompanying them. He could take no risks. No offence, mind. There had been a big burglary two buildings away only last week. You couldn't be too careful in *his* job. This way! He would just switch on the light. Just a minute while he bolted the door. The lift was on the left, if they would walk on. He would take them up in a minute. Yes, Miss Tibbit's room, he explained going up in the lift, was right at the end of the passage. Straight through the swing doors and then to the right. He had better lead the way. Nice roomy offices, weren't they? Plenty of air and light. This was the main office, to their left; at least, the main office on this floor. The business was run on separate floors now. Here was Miss Tibbit's room. Half a moment! He had better switch on the light.

Martin saw a small room, a typewriting table, with its typewriter in the centre of the room. A hat stand in the corner. Steel filing cabinets.

"What did I tell you?" the night watchman asked. "There's no one here, you see."

"I expect the young lady's gone out somewhere," the policeman suggested. "Pictures, or something."

"I don't think she'll be doing that," Martin quietly replied.

"I suppose you've heard about poor Mr. Severn, sir?"

"Yes."

"Sad, wasn't it, officer? Killed in that train accident this morning."

"Was he on that?" the policeman asked. "That so? Nasty business, that. Still, as I always says, those foreign trains don't seem properly run, to me," and the policeman stuck his thumbs into his belt. "Still, it's very sad, I suppose. Well, as the young lady's not here, sir, we'd better get along."

"Like to see Mr. Severn's room while you're here, officer? He had it all panelled out last year, poor fellow. Liked to have things nice, even in his office. I often saw flowers on his desk when I came on my rounds of an evening. Had soundproof windows fitted, too. You can't hear a sound when they're shut. A proper show-place really. Just a minute! I'll take you in."

Martin and the constable remained in the doorway as the night watchman groped his way to the switch. Suddenly there was a blaze of light, and each man stood transfixed. Carol was lying across a desk, near the window. She had obviously been sitting there, for a shorthand note-book had fallen to the floor by her side. Her arms were outstretched towards an empty padded chair.

Then Martin pushed the police constable aside and walked slowly over to the desk.

It was fortunate, Martin contemplated, that he had not bought two dozen red roses *each*, at the florist's on the way

home from his office earlier in the evening. If he had, there would have been no money left over with which to pay the taxi. Martin realized this, driving back to Clapham Common in the early hours of the morning. Carol seemed still in the trance in which they had found her. The police officer, with a knowledge of first-aid, had been most helpful. "Take her straight home," he had said, as they finally parted at the door of Severn & Browning's office. "Keep her warm. Then turn her over to her mother."

"Feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you, Martin."

She spoke slowly. She seemed hardly aware of him as she sat huddled in the corner of the taxi, staring vacantly at the back of the driver's head, as the antiquated vehicle chugged its long way towards Linden Terrace. Occasionally she shuddered. With that exception she did not move. Her face seemed ashen, as he saw it, at moments, in the lights from the passing street lamps. No other word escaped her lips. Martin was sometimes aware that her hands were clenched. Later, she would sigh and sink limply into her corner, her eyes closed. Martin did not understand these things. Women had strange bodies and had strange reactions, as was demonstrated by Carol's complete prostration. The news of Mr. Severn's death must have been a shock to her, as it had been to him and to everyone in Linden Terrace. But she was absolutely tired out. That was the trouble. No one could work at the pace that Carol had been doing for the last few months. He had explained this to the police officer. Three nights a week, for nearly three months, she had been at her office until nine o'clock. Even her Christmas holidays had been spent in one mad rush through the Continent, attending meetings with Mr. Severn, no doubt typing long reports until the early hours of the morning. "Women can't stand up to that sort of thing," the policeman had agreed. "At least, not a young lady of her build."

It seemed ironical, Martin thought, that their first moments together should be like this. Sitting in that cab was the first time that they had been really alone since her return. But he could not tell her about America now. He longed to touch her hand as it lay still, now, on the shiny black covering of the taxi seat, but he felt that he should not do this, for Carol's thoughts were so far away. She had fainted—how long ago he did not know. They had found her in that state. She was ill. Her nervous energy had snapped, like the sudden breaking of a twig. She lay limply, now. Her immense vitality had gone. He could not tax her with serious problems, like America, now. He must wait until to-morrow, when she would feel better. He must explain the circumstances to Preston to-morrow, too. But his closeness to Carol thrilled him again, as it had done when, having walked slowly to her chair in Mr. Severn's office nearly an hour before, he had placed his hands, apprehensively, on to her shoulders. Her body was warm. That had been his only concern—a concern so great that his reason had seemed to leave him during those few moments of abject terror. And then her body beneath his fingers. They lingered there, as his eyes had looked upwards in their unspeakable relief. And now they were crossing the Common, sitting in separate corners of the taxi seat, no word passing between them. . . . His promise to Preston still unfulfilled.

They passed the church at the corner, to find Walter Tibbit looking anxiously up the street, Bert Freeman standing beside him. In a moment Carol had been handed over to the care of her mother, as the police officer had suggested, and Martin was walking thoughtfully up the stairs to his bed.

XIV

DAYS PASSED. DULL DAYS for Martin, with wet pavements and slushy streets, overcast skies, and crowded tram-cars. A further gloom had descended upon Number Five Linden Terrace. Carol had been taken to hospital.

Dr. Oliver had tended her in her downstairs bedroom for five days, where she had remained oblivious to her surroundings, unaware even of her mother's constant visits to her room. She just lay motionless in her bed, her eyes staring at the whitewashed ceiling, taking no food. The alarm in the Tibbit household had increased. Dr. Oliver's expression had grown daily more troubled. She could not remain at home, he had said; she needed constant attention. The mind was a complex organ and he must call in a specialist; otherwise, she must go to a hospital. Millicent Tibbit had pleaded. She had little faith in hospitals. The only alternative, Dr. Oliver had said, was to have special nurses at home, necessitating rather heavy and unnecessary expenditure. Besides, the downstairs bedroom was inconvenient. If a bed could be put up on the first floor, in the bedroom recently vacated by the James', Dr. Oliver would agree to her remaining at home. Millicent Tibbit had shuddered. That would be quite impossible, she had said. Then it was cheaper, and much more sensible, to send her to hospital, where she would have every attention and be constantly under observation by the best doctors.

Millicent Tibbit's aversion to hospitals was inbred. They were places where people were taken to die, and they were bleak and cold and uncared for. You queued up with the

working-classes on visiting days and you sat in a large ward, surrounded by rather common people, as you carried on whispered conversations with the sick, in order to avoid being overheard by the rest of the inmates. Hospitals did not, therefore, fit in with Millicent's scheme of life. That a daughter of hers should be sent there was an overwhelming disappointment.

Many anxious discussions had taken place in the down-stair front room and Martin had at once offered to give up his own room. She might recapture some atmosphere of the past from looking at the climbing roses on the wallpaper that she had learned to know as a child and which she had first seen from her cot. Often a deranged mind was arrested by some memory like that, Peter Thomas had said. Martin had argued strenuously for the adoption of this course, offering the remainder of his War Savings, too, towards the expenses of the nurse. But Walter Tibbit had a high opinion of Dr. Oliver's capabilities.

"It is very kind of you, Martin," he had said, wagging his head thoughtfully, "very kind. Still, we'd better do what Dr. Oliver says."

Two days later Carol was taken away in an ambulance. Martin found her gone when he returned from his work.

Linden Terrace became deeply concerned by this second blow to befall the Tibbits, and Walter was again inconsolable, as he had been over Herbert James' suicide. Bert Freeman used his persuasive powers in an endeavour to revive his neighbour's erstwhile cheerfulness, taking him often to the Reindeer, where Mr. George drank, too, to Carol's speedy recovery. The Potters sent flowers. So did Martin. Millicent Tibbit made jellies and delivered them personally at the hospital. Joyce and Stanley Heavitree sent a jig-saw puzzle, unaware that their gift, in common with the rest, had neither been delivered to the ward, nor was Carol aware of their kindness. She lay quietly in her bed, her wide-

opened eyes staring at the ceiling, having now to be artificially fed. It seemed, Dr. Oliver confided to Bert Freeman, as if the girl had lost all interest in living. Often such symptoms arose from a severe breakdown. Patients asked only to be left alone, and unless food were given to them artificially, there was a grave risk. If only they could awaken that desire to get better, he would feel happier. After being admitted to the hospital, Carol had implored them to leave her quietly to herself, for she wished only to die. Poor old Walter must never hear about this, of course. Perhaps Mr. Freeman, being so intimate with the Tibbits, might be able to throw some light on the case.

"No, Doc," Bert had said, "can't make it out. She's just been working herself to a standstill, that's what it is. No girl can work at the pace that she's been doing. And if we're not careful, we'll have old Walter knocked up, too. He's not been the same since that suicide at Christmas. And then his daughter taken queer like this. It isn't as though it's a case of measles, or some disease you can catch hold of. I saw her when young Martin Bowling brought her back the night of her breakdown, and believe me, Doc, I never saw such a look on a girl's face."

"Yes, the mind is a tricky business, Mr. Freeman," Dr. Oliver had said, cleaning his glasses thoughtfully. "Still, keep what I've told you to yourself."

"Naturally, Doc. Wouldn't do to have Walter know."

The days drew on. Uneventful days. February came, bringing further rain. Ethel Freeman made a point of running over to Number Five as often as possible, to talk to Millicent, who had been rather unexpectedly disturbed over her daughter's breakdown. No longer did she speak bombastically of the events of the neighbourhood. Instead, she sat quietly at home with Walter, a softness seeming to creep into her speech and into her general demeanour. She still bore her resentment towards hospitals in general, especially

since all visitors to Carol had been forbidden. Walter and Millicent had made many pilgrimages there, only to be turned away, so Walter now decided, in view of this, to use the telephone at the Reindeer, speaking three times a day to the hospital and carrying the news hurriedly back to Number Five.

Martin had been Walter's constant companion after the Atlantic had closed its doors each night, the downstairs front room becoming his spiritual home. But neither dominoes, nor a game of whist, could revive Walter's spirits. The three of them would sit huddled over the front-room fire, drinking tea, since Carol's contributions to the Tibbit's weekly housekeeping had ceased and the remains of their Christmas fare had long disappeared. The granite clock ticked steadily on the mantelpiece, chiming the hours. At eight o'clock Walter and Martin would go to the Reindeer for their last inquiry at the hospital. Often they would remain there whilst Martin bought his landlord a drink, and then they would return home, and sit quietly before the fire until it was time to go to bed. Stanley Heavitree, who now seemed to spend every evening upstairs in the Bowlings' front room, would often come down and endeavour, too, to remove Walter from his lethargy, but Martin had discouraged these visits since finding that Stanley's presence only seemed to drive Walter deeper into his depression. "I suppose he's all right," Walter had said, sniffing loudly. "Just not my type, I suppose."

These gloomy days continued until mid-February. The Tibbits were then informed that Carol could have her first visitor, and the news spread quickly through Linden Terrace. Martin was just leaving the house when Walter returned excitedly from his morning telephone call to the hospital to announce the good news. Fred Potter was informed, at the gate. Ethel Freeman, noticing the three men talking together in the street, opened her

window and called across, asking for the latest news. Millicent hurried to the door in her quilted dressing-gown. Mrs. Potter came to her front door, too, and joined in the conversation. It was certainly encouraging news, they all agreed. Sympathetic messages to Carol were sent from both sides of the street and Martin stayed behind to talk to Walter, allowing Fred Potter to walk up Linden Terrace alone, a newspaper carefully folded under his arm, his spindly legs taking long strides as he strode towards the Common, swinging his umbrella in his right hand.

"Yes, Martin, I'll tell her. Very kind of you, I'm sure. Go back in the warm now, Mother. Better not do the washing to-day. We'll start for the hospital early, and get there as soon as the doors open. Thank you, Mrs. Potter. I'll tell her. Yes, it will do us good to see her again. Yes, Ethel," he shouted across the street, "Mother and me will tell her that. She'll be very sorry to hear about the whooping-cough, too. How is she to-day? Better? Good! Nasty complaint. Had it myself once. Now then, Martin," he continued, opening his coat cheerfully and regarding his gold watch. "It's time you got along. I'll give you all the news when you get home to-night. No. Don't send her anything to-day. I'll see what she wants when I get there. Leave everything to me. That's right. There's a good boy."

Martin heard Ethel Freeman's window close. He raised his hat once more to Mrs. Potter before she closed her door. At the end of the street he turned to find Walter still at the gate and he returned his landlord's wave, before walking across the Common to his tram.

He would gladly have given a week's salary to have accompanied the Tibbits to the hospital. If he had known earlier, he would have written a note, which they could have delivered to Carol, telling her that she was still so con-

stantly in his thoughts, and that the loneliness without her was becoming difficult to bear. He could not explain that to Walter. The message that he had sent was one which would give no indication to his landlord of the depths of his feelings.

"Tell her," he had said, "that we've missed her a lot. Tell her, too, that I'm going to give a party for her when she comes back. We're going to the Savoy! Tell her, won't you?"

"Yes, Martin—I'll tell her. Very kind of you, I'm sure."

He arrived at his office to give Peter Thomas the good news, and he talked at length over the marble-topped table during lunch, planning his forthcoming party at the Savoy in great detail, as Peter leant across the table, listening to and adding suggestions to ensure that the evening should be a real success.

"You see, it will be an important night for me, Peter."

"You're going to pop the question then—eh?"

"Yes."

"Well," Peter ruminated, "I hope it'll all go as you plan, Martin. I must say you're going to do her proud, though, and no mistake. Don't see how she could very well refuse you after a swell turn-out like that," he laughed. "You've certainly got some big ideas."

"Well, she's worth it, Peter. She's used to things like that. You have to do things well with Carol. Besides, it will be a very important night for both of us, you see."

"Yes. I see that, Martin. Still, you're doing her proud and no mistake."

The day seemed to pass more slowly than other days. At five o'clock, Martin put down his pen, opened his drawer and drew out his soap-tin and towel. He washed hurriedly, and was shortly boarding a tramcar. Fifteen minutes later he

was walking briskly across the Common, and he arrived at Number Five Linden Terrace, hurriedly opening the door of the downstairs front room. Walter Tibbit was sitting silently in front of the fire.

"How was she, Mr. Tibbit?" he asked, breathlessly.

Walter turned.

"Bad, Martin," he said, shaking his head sadly from side to side. "A big shock to Mother and me. The poor girl's skin and bone. Just wasting away. Terrible to see, Martin. Couldn't face it again, for a bit. Poor Mother took on badly, too. Cried in the ward. Very upsetting it was," and Walter was again looking into the fire.

Millicent joined them, living again through the agonies of the afternoon, dwelling at length upon the tragedy of the poor girl's wasted appearance and of her complete disinterestedness in their visit.

"And she hadn't seen her poor mother since they took her away!" she added, convulsively.

"Did you give her my message?" Martin asked, breaking the silence that had fallen upon them.

"Yes, Martin."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing."

An ominous silence. Then:

"Did she send any message to me?"

Millicent Tibbit began blowing her nose.

"No, she never mentioned you, Martin."

"*But didn't she mention the Savoy?*"

"No. Didn't take no interest in Bert's little girl having the whooping-cough, either," Walter moaned. "She might have been a stranger to us. Needn't have troubled to go down, for all the good it did," and he turned back to the fire.

"Where are you going, Martin?" Millicent wheezed, blowing her nose once more.

But there was no answer. The door of the front room had quietly closed. Then the front door slammed.

When Joyce called him the next morning, she found him already awake. He rose quickly from his bed and walked over to the window and drew aside the blind to find that it was still raining. There was no movement, he noticed, from the Potters' house next door, the only movement being from the cherry tree in their garden which looked naked and bedraggled, and the neighbouring roof-tops seemed rain-swept and grey. Martin shuddered. Another wet day! He put on his dressing-gown and walked into the front room, and, opening the door of the partitioned-off bathroom, he lighted the geyser, sitting on the edge of the bath as the water poured in with a steady stream.

To-day was a big moment in his life, he realized. Destinies were to be shaped to-day! Action was going to be taken, and, like the throw of the dice, his future was to be decided. He was going to telephone Preston's house from the Underground Station before going to his office, in case Preston might be leaving the house early. Not, of course, that that was likely. But he could take no risks to-day. And he was going to telephone the hospital from the station, too, since Mr. Drake, hearing him put through a call recently to inquire about Carol, had called down the wrath of God upon his head. Mr. Drake seemed to have one ear continuously upon him now, when he used the telephone in the course of business. And having put through those two calls, he could begin to shape his plans in more detail.

"Will you have a rasher for your breakfast, Martin?"

"Yes, Joyce."

"Miserable day, isn't it?"

"Foull"

"Are you coming straight home?"

"No, I'm going to see Carol."

"Oh—that *will* be nice! Give her my love, won't you? Does she know about Stanley and me?"

"I don't know. I'll tell her, anyhow."

"And ask her if she'd like another jig-saw. I found them so helpful when I had bronchitis that time. Ask her if there's anything special she'd fancy."

"I will."

"And you'd better hurry, Martin, as I'm putting the rashers on now."

"Right."

Martin closed the bathroom door. In dressing, some moments later, he noticed that the continual rain had spoilt the shape of his trousers, so that they sagged dismally below the knee. He would have to ask Joyce to iron them back into some semblance of their original shape. Meantime, they would get another soaking to-day, from all appearances, so perhaps they could be ironed to-night. He ate his rasher and drank his tea; he said good-bye to his mother, and knocked at the door of the Tibbits' bedroom to assure them that he would go to see Carol at the hospital. Then meeting Fred Potter at his gate, they walked up the street together. Yes, poor old Walter Tibbit looked bad. He hadn't been the same since Christmas. The visit to the hospital yesterday had not improved his condition, either. Yes, the poor old chap was feeling it very much. There was no question about that. It *had* been a bad winter, one way and the other, Martin agreed. In some ways the worst that he had known. At the end of the Common they parted, Martin going straight to a telephone box, his four pennies already in his hand. He telephoned Preston first. Mr. Preston was not yet up, the butler said. If it was really important he would call him, but Mr. Preston was very late last night. Yes, it was *very* urgent.

Martin waited apprehensively. Perhaps Preston would be

angry at being called like this. But still, he must take that risk. It was the throw of the dice. It seemed an interminable time before a sleepy voice came to the telephone.

"I'm sorry, Preston. I wouldn't have worried you, but it's very urgent. I *must* see you. Yes, to-day—please! The only time is in my lunch-hour. Could you make it one-fifteen? At the Club? Oh—thank you, Preston. Yes, I'll be there to the minute. Thank you very much. Yes, I'll explain everything then. I'm so sorry to have woken you up like this. Yes, I'm just on my way to work. I'm speaking from a call-box at Clapham Common. Thank you, Preston. One-fifteen."

Martin replaced the receiver, and began looking up the telephone number of the hospital, to make sure, as he had no other pennies. Shortly he was speaking to the hospital, being passed on from one person to another, before finding anyone who could deal with his inquiry.

"Oh—the visiting hours are from two till four. Thank you."

Once more Martin replaced the receiver. This was going to be difficult, he thought, as it would mean obtaining special permission from his office. But still, he would explain the circumstances to Mr. Drake. Then he walked out into the street and jumped on to the first tram that passed. He was already wet through from walking across the Common, and his trousers hung heavily over the top of his boots. A smell of other damp clothing and tobacco smoke filled the top of the tram, the windows of which were covered with steam, so that he had to wipe the glass with his hand in order to see through. His paper lay unopened on his lap. . . . Yes, to-day was an important one in his life. He had decided many things as he walked aimlessly about the Common the night before. Now he was going to see Carroll Walter Tibbit had been waiting for him on his return last night and had led him once more into the front room and had asked him if he would go down to the hospital. Dr.

Oliver, who had called in Martin's absence, had explained that sick people often had a complex about those who are near and dear to them, which may have been responsible for the coldness of Carol's welcome to them in the afternoon. He did not like to trouble Martin . . .

"Thought you were going to arrive early once you moved this way," Peter Thomas laughed, as Martin entered the office twenty minutes later.

"I've been telephoning," Martin replied, lifting the flap and walking through into the main office.

Mr. Hilton and Mr. Brown were in the cloakroom, grumbling about the weather. Martin bade them good morning and walked to his place on the counter.

"What was the news of Carol?" Peter Thomas asked, putting away his newspaper.

"I'm going to see her to-day."

"Oh, you are—are you? I expect that'll cheer you up a bit."

"Yes."

"You've been properly in the dumps lately."

"I know."

Peter Thomas drew out his pen and began examining the nib, pressing it thoughtfully against his thumb nail.

"But I expect it did the old people good seeing her yesterday," he said.

"They were very worried by the way she was looking, Peter. She's lost a lot of weight, they say."

"Go on! Still, I suppose everyone loses weight lying in bed like that for all this time. Nerves, too."

"Yes."

"I expect she'll be glad to see you, though, Martin. What time are you going along?"

"Well, the visiting hours are from two till four. I'll have to ask Drake for time off."

At that moment Mr. Drake walked into the office, his

felt hat sitting solemnly on the top of his head. He shook his umbrella, amid a chorus of "Good morning, Mr. Drake," before lifting the flap and walking through into the main office.

"Are you taking her anything along?"

"I'll take some flowers, I expect."

"You ought to get red roses, you know. Not pink ones—real red roses. That's the kind to take," Peter Thomas chuckled, placing his pen in the grooved section of the teak counter, and leaning over to examine his inkwell. "*Norman!*"

"Yes, sir?" came a voice from behind.

"How about my ink?"

"Coming, sir."

"One of these days you'll find no salary coming to you at the end of the week, young fellow-me-lad. How the hell am I going to conduct the business of this Company without ink?"

"No, sir," Norman panted breathlessly, refilling the inkwell from a large earthenware jar.

"And get your hair cut."

"Yes, sir."

"And don't let me catch you overlooking this important duty again."

"No, sir."

"Or I'll report you to Sir Hugh Caldecott."

"Who's he, sir?"

"My boy!" Peter Thomas said. "He is the chairman of this illustrious Company."

"I've never met him, sir. How should I know?"

"And I doubt if you ever will meet him until you learn to wash *behind* your ears as well as in the front!"

"That's mud, sir, that got splashed up."

"Well, go and clean yourself, you dirty little boy."

"Yes, sir," and Norman ducked under the counter with his jar of ink and disappeared smilingly into the background.

"Mr. Brown, bring over the post, if you please," came Mr. Drake's stentorian voice from behind Martin's back, and the business of the Atlantic Insurance Company again started for the day.

The morning was a busy one. There were many callers at the office. Martin had to find the most suitable moment to approach the Chief Clerk for permission to have time off to see Carol. He felt sure that Mr. Thistlewaite would grant him leave right away, but he had learnt from experience not to go above Mr. Drake's head again. The moment came during a lull in the morning's work, and Martin put down his pen and walked to the raised desk in the centre of the room.

"Mr. Drake," he said, "may I speak to you?"

After a long wait, Mr. Drake put down his pen and removed his pince-nez.

"Yes?"

"Would you mind if I took a little time off this afternoon? A friend of mine is ill. She's in hospital. The visiting hours are in the afternoon. I can't get along otherwise."

"She?"

"Yes—a young lady."

"I see," and Mr. Drake began rapping his pince-nez against the knuckles of his horny hand. "What kind of a business do you imagine this is—a marriage market?"

Martin stood looking at his boots.

"She is my neighbour," he explained. "Her parents are anxious."

"Well, the sooner you learn that this is a business and not a playground, Mr. Bowling, the better you and I will get on. You had a splendid rise at Christmas and your only idea since has been to leave the office on the stroke of five every night, and now you want to go visiting your lady friends during the afternoon! Get back to your desk!"

"Mr. Drake! This is not a trivial matter. My neighbour is

ill—seriously ill. Her parents have asked me to go to see her. It might do her good.”

“By the look of you, Mr. Bowling, I cannot imagine you having anything but a most deleterious effect upon anybody—let alone the sick!”

“My personal appearance, Mr. Drake, is surely my own affair.”

“I do not wish any back answers, Mr. Bowling!”

“Nor do I wish to give any. I am merely asking, if you have any human kindness, to allow me to visit my neighbour this afternoon. I will, if you wish, stay late in the office to-night to make up for it. My work will not suffer. But I have been asked by my neighbour to visit his daughter, on doctor’s advice.”

“Mr. Bowling! I do not mind rogues, but I have an abhorrence of fools,” and Mr. Drake was rapping his knuckles more quickly in his annoyance. “Doctor’s advice, indeed! Soon you will be telling me you’ve got to bury your grandmother! Please get back to your desk, Mr. Bowling, before I lose my patience.”

“You won’t give me permission, then?”

“Mr. Bowling! I am getting tired of your impertinence. I may *look* a fool, but I won’t have *you* taking me for one. Under no circumstances will I give you permission, unless, of course, you would like to terminate your services at the end of the month.”

Mr. Drake snapped his pince-nez back on to his bulbous nose and picked up his pen. Martin stood, one hand clenched. Then he allowed it to relax and walked slowly back to his desk.

No. The moment had not yet come. But it *would* come. Destinies were being shaped to-day. He must think clearly before taking action. There must be no indiscriminate rushing: everything must be properly organized in advance, as by a General before battle. A false move at this juncture

might lose the entire campaign, and there was too much at stake. He had realized that last night, tossing about in his bed, listening to the Church clock at the corner chiming away the hours. No, the situation was already too fraught with difficulty, and he must not allow Mr. Drake's antagonism to make him lose control at this critical stage.

"He certainly does get after you," Peter Thomas whispered. "I wonder you stand it."

"I'm biding my time, Peter. Don't you worry."

"I think I'd hit him if he kept on like that to me."

"I nearly did," Martin replied.

"What are you going to do about Carol now?"

"I'll see her all right."

"I shouldn't go too far, Martin. It might make things awkward for you."

"*I'm* steering the ship, Peter. Leave it to me."

At twelve-forty-five Martin again laid down his pen and walked to the cloakroom, taking time over his toilet. Then he put on his overcoat and felt hat and walked back to the counter.

Mr. Drake drew out his watch.

"It is just ten minutes to one, Mr. Bowling. I would remind you that your lunch-hour is from one till two."

"I am lunching with Mr. Preston Daley, Mr. Drake. My appointment is for one-fifteen."

"Then you will be back at one-fifty."

"I shall be back when my business is completed," Martin replied, closing his drawer with unnecessary noise. Then he walked out of the office, under the porch, and out into the street, catching the first bus going north.

Steady! No excitement now! Take everything quietly! Hyde Park Corner, please. Twopence? Here's a shilling. Mr. Drake is not going to win this round. Thank you, tenpence change. Above all, keep a cool head. We'll have everything organized before long, and we'll see Carol, too. We'll stop

this rot which has been setting in on all sides. We'll have everything on a firm basis before to-night. Thank goodness we've put an end to indecisions and to the wasting of time. Everything had been mishandled from the first. As Peter Thomas says, I know nothing about women. But I'm learning . . . and Martin's spirits rose as the bus rattled its way towards Victoria. To be able to talk to Preston again after associating with all these small men, cheered his tired heart. Preston was a man of the world. He understood and knew. His advice was all that mattered. Preston, alone, would know what to do now. Preston would find a way out. Just a cool head meantime. How, what, or when was far from clear, but Preston would know. The bus came presently to Hyde Park Corner and Martin noticed by the clock near the Park that his journey had taken longer than usual, owing to the congestion of traffic in the rainswept streets. He hurriedly crossed the road and entered another bus going down Piccadilly, and arrived at the Porchester Club with two minutes to spare. Yes, Mr. Daley was already in the Club. A page would show him to the cloakroom, the hall porter said. The clock over the mantelpiece registered one-fifteen as Martin crossed the floor to the fireplace to greet Preston, sitting in his leather arm-chair, his suède shoes on the fender seat.

"Hello, young Martin," he smiled, glancing up at the clock over the mantelpiece. "Punctual again, I see. You know Tim?"

"Hello," a voice called from the depths of an arm-chair. "And if you don't mind, that's all I'll have to say this morning," and Tim covered his white face with his hand, and shuddered.

"Martin, we had a bad night," Preston laughed. "Poor old Tim has spent the morning at Heppell's, but even *they* find it difficult to cure him this time!"

A grunt came from the arm-chair on Martin's left.

"What will you drink?"

"A Manhattan, thank you."

"Do you mind pushing the bell. I'm not feeling so good myself."

Martin obeyed, and drew up a chair.

"I was sorry to wake you so early this morning," he said.

"Oh—I'd forgotten that. Anything wrong?"

"Well, I want to talk to you, Preston—urgently."

"All right. You're lunching with me, aren't you? Oh—a Manhattan, a dry Martini, and a glass of soda water, Tomkins."

The Club waiter bowed and disappeared.

"We'll talk over lunch," Preston said. "Any news of Carol?"

"Nothing very good, I'm afraid, Preston."

"I'm so sorry. Tell me about it later," and Preston offered Martin a cigarette. "You'd better not smoke this morning, Tim," he laughed. "You might catch alight."

Tim grunted again and sank deeper into his chair.

"A foul day to wake up to, isn't it?" and Preston threw a match into the grate. "Much more of this and we'll be afloat."

"You were last night," Tim muttered, his face still in his hands.

Preston laughed.

"I was afloat! I like that!"

"A pretty mess you made of things, I must say!" and Tim shuddered as if he had had a sudden spasm.

"If you hadn't butted in, my lad, all would have been well," Preston laughed. "There's one golden rule to remember in life, Tim. Never interfere with a woman when her mind is made up. She called you a louse—and a louse you were, swaying about her drawing-room like a faded lily! I never saw such an exhibition!"

"My behaviour was exemplary. It was only hiccoughs. Anyone gets those. A nasty, irritating complaint. Someone died of it recently. Just hiccoughed to death."

"Well, the aftermath is coming to you, by the look of things."

"You seem to have some wonderful times together," Martin said, thoughtfully, tucking a lace into the top of his boot as a grunt came again from the chair on his left.

"What's the news in the business, Martin?" Preston asked, settling down again in his chair, his feet returning to the fender stool. "Anything exciting?"

"No, Preston. Nothing very exciting."

"Did you get that insurance on Angela's car?"

"No. You were going to speak to her, if you remember. I can't get her on the telephone and she doesn't answer my letters."

"Oh—so I was," Preston said. "What's really the trouble?"

"Well," Martin explained. "She's had a very bad claims experience with her last company. Mr. Thistlewaite isn't prepared to accept the risk without certain reservations, I'm afraid."

"She's a menace to the roads!" Tim muttered. "I always said so," and he sank deeper into his chair.

"Give Mr. Faulkner his soda water, Tomkins," Preston laughed, as the Club waiter appeared with a tray. "Your health, Martin!"

Tim opened one eye as the waiter approached his chair.

"Do you want me to die of the hiccoughs!" he muttered.

"Take it away, Tomkins, and bring me a large glass of beer. Soda water, indeed!" and he closed his eye with a shudder.

"I thought you weren't talking this morning."

"I'm not. I'm only standing up for myself."

"I'm sorry, Martin, that every time you come here you find my friend with an unfortunate hang-over," Preston laughed again. "Anyhow, in his favour, it isn't habitual. Your health again, Martin. Some semblance of health to you, Tim."

Tim grunted once more, as Preston drained his Martini in one gulp.

"Your health, Preston. And yours, Mr. Faulkner."

"Well, I expect you're in a hurry," and Preston rose from his chair and placed his glass on the shelf. "Let's go up to lunch."

Martin found himself drinking his Manhattan more quickly than he had intended. Then he placed his glass by the side of Preston's.

"Good-bye, Tim. I'll see you later. You won't be eating to-day, I suppose."

"That's entirely my affair."

"Well, take it easy," Preston laughed, placing his hand on Tim's shoulder. "The only thing for dizzy spells is to keep as near the ground as possible."

"*You* should know," Tim muttered. "Good-bye, Martin. Come and lunch with *me* one of these days. It'll pay you. I'll give you inside information on Angela's motoring habits."

Preston took Martin affectionately by the arm and they left the smoking-room, leaving Tim still huddled in his chair.

"Poor old Tim's in a bad way," Preston said. "He will mix his drinks. If he keeps to champagne he can go on till the cows come home. Still, he'll improve as the day goes on. This way. Up the stairs."

They arrived in the dining-room and Martin found himself standing in front of a long table, filled with a wide variety of cold foods.

"Anything you like here? There's the menu. If you want something hot, I advise the roast beef. It's good here."

"Right, Preston. I'll have that."

"A little soup first? Fish?"

"No. I'll just have the roast beef, thank you."

"Right, let's find a table."

Martin followed Preston, pausing many times whilst other

members exchanged words with his friend, before finally sitting at a small table near the window.

"What'll you drink?"

"What do you usually drink, Preston?"

"Well. I'm having beer."

"I'd like that, too."

"Right. Two tankards of beer."

The wine steward then left their table.

"Well, Martin—what's the trouble?"

"That job? Is it still open?"

"I've no idea. It was. But when you turned it down, I just rang up Miss Simkin and told her. That's all I know."

"I want it, Preston. I need it badly. I must get away. I know that now. I should have jumped at it. I was mad not to take it. It was Carol. I couldn't leave her then. I must now," he added.

Preston looked up.

"What?" he said. "Is it all off?"

Martin looked at the tablecloth and fingered his fork thoughtfully.

"It's just no good, Preston," he said, after a pause. "I see that now. I love her. I always shall. It's rather like breaking myself in two. I realize that. But I can't just waste my life. Especially now."

"Martin," said Preston, leaning across the table, "something has upset you pretty much, hasn't it? Don't tell me if you don't want to. If I can help—you know I will. But I can see your distress, old fellow. I'm so sorry."

"I want that job," Martin answered, his jaw seeming to stiffen in an effort to keep his emotion under control.

"I'll ring up Miss Simkin after lunch."

"Thank you, Preston."

Silence fell upon them, and Martin's eyes seemed riveted on his fork. Preston was looking across the table, his eyes searching Martin's face. Presently, he touched his hand.

"Don't get upset, old fellow," he said. "Nothing's worth it."

"You wouldn't understand," Martin replied slowly.

Their lunch arrived then; two tankards of beer followed.

"But I'm going to see her again," Martin added, a moment later. "Her parents think it might do her good. I want to see her once more, too, from my own point of view. She has been everything to me. Always will be. I couldn't go away without seeing her. It will be difficult, I expect, that meeting. But I must see her."

"When are you going?"

"I must—to-day. I decided last night. I must go to-day."

"When?"

"That's the trouble, Preston. The visiting hours are from two till four. I thought I might have gone after the office."

"Where is she?"

"In St. Saviour's Hospital. Dr. Oliver sent her there. They're friends of his."

"That's Briercroft's place."

"Briercroft?"

"Sir James Briercroft—the surgeon."

"Oh—yes?"

"My father is building an extension there. He's done a lot for that hospital already. If you want anything from St. Saviour's, you've come to the right man."

Martin looked up.

"Preston," he said, slowly, "is there *nothing* you can't do?"

"Well," Preston replied, pausing awkwardly, "if there's anything I can do to help you about St. Saviour's, it's as easy as my telephoning Miss Simkin."

"You're wonderful, Preston."

"You want to go there after the office?"

"Yes."

"I'll fix it."

"Thanks."

"And we'll 'phone Miss Simkin."

"It's unbelievable, really," Martin said, after a pause.

"What is?"

"Last night. I decided everything last night. You were my only rock. And I come to you and everything is settled so easily—no fuss, no excitement. You just use the telephone. It's unbelievable, really," he added again.

"Eat your lunch," Preston laughed, "and we'll get to work."

There was a strained silence. Martin picked up his knife and fork. Preston watched him.

"Never let a woman get you down, old fellow," he said. "It isn't worth it. There are so many pebbles on the beach. Too many, really."

"You don't understand," Martin murmured, eating slowly.

"You don't want to tell me?"

"There's nothing to tell, Preston. I just see the position, that's all. I can't face having her near me all the time when I mean nothing to her. I couldn't face that."

"You loved her pretty badly?" Preston asked, a moment later.

"There never has been anyone else. Never will."

"It's funny," Preston mused, fingering his roll, "but I've never felt like that about a woman. The trouble, I find, is to keep up the interest."

"You're attractive, Preston. Women take to you."

"Don't they to you?"

"No. Not before."

"But you're a good fellow, Martin. I should have thought you would have had plenty of affairs."

"No."

"Well, don't let this one get you down, old fellow. It isn't worth it."

"You don't understand. Carol's different."

"So are they all—at the time."

Martin shook his head.

"Will Miss Simkin be in if you telephone?" he asked, impatiently.

"Yes. She has her lunch in the office."

"Must get away, Preston. From everything."

"Well, we'll see what's happened to that job as soon as we've eaten this. We'll telephone Briercroft, too."

"Yes. I must go down there to-day. Promised I would."

"Well, let's eat up. Meantime here's to you, Martin," and Preston's tankard was raised. "Good luck to the job, too. I hope it isn't too late."

"So do I. Thank you, Preston. Sorry I'm a bit upset. You're the only one who knows what I'm going to do. It's the first time I've spoken about it. It sounds more difficult when I speak about it. It was only in my mind before. But you must take a strong line sometimes, you know. No good just drifting. Especially when it will only hurt more."

"Yes. Afraid drifting's a continual state of mine, though."

"Don't let's talk about it any more. Do you mind?"

"My dear fellow—of course not."

Martin sat fingering his knife and fork, not eating. He heard the rain beating against the window by his side and he saw the rain-soaked umbrellas passing below, and the slow movement of the traffic. Preston was talking to him, but he found himself paying little attention. The die was cast. His two problems looked as though they were already half solved. But his resolve seemed to lack its original determination. An overwhelming sadness had come to him since he had entered the dining-room, from the moment that he had first spoken of his plans. He found that at moments he had to grind his teeth to regain his composure. And Preston was talking gaily, asking no questions in return. Martin wondered whether Preston had noticed his distress and was

purposely keeping the conversation to himself. It would be so like Preston to do that. Nothing ever ruffled Preston. He knew the answer to everything. He dealt with things gracefully, just as he was doing now. It would be difficult to speak at this moment, Martin knew, and he was thankful for Preston telling him again of his last visit to America. He had been so vastly interested the first time. America? In a moment they would be telephoning Miss Simkin. Preston seemed to be thinking the same thing. He was following Preston now from the dining-room, and Preston was taking his arm, as they walked down the stairs.

"So there you are," he said. "That's America, Martin."

"Yes."

"And if you go, I'll give you some introductions. No country like it. You'll soon forget your troubles out there. Now let's go and 'phone. Hello, Tim. Feeling better? Oh, you can't talk yet. I'll see you later, then. Go back to your chair meantime and get into a sitting posture. You'll feel better that way. The 'phone's this way, Martin. Now, have I got any pennies? Ah, yes. Four. All I'll need. Give me Avenue 9001, please. Yes, Avenue 9001. Come inside the box, Martin, and close the door. Cross your thumbs, too. We've got to pull this off. Take the money and put two pennies in the box, Martin. That's right. Miss Simkin, please. Hello. Miss Simkin? Look, you remember that job in New York? Yes, the one I spoke to you about. Yes, my friend couldn't take it at the time. Is it still open? What, another man's got it? Oh! He hasn't actually sailed yet? Ill, is he? How long is he going to be ill? You don't know? Well, keep him on the sick list a bit longer, will you? You can't do that? I know you can't. But don't do anything definite till I've spoken to you again. Yes, I'll speak to my father to-night. What? I'll see to all that to-morrow. I *know* I forgot yesterday. But I won't to-morrow. Tie a knot in my handkerchief. Afraid that's no good, I always

forget what the knot's for. Ring me up to remind me, will you? Thanks. Yes, ring me at home. And don't forget to do nothing about this fellow who's sick. Besides, you can't have delicate people on your staff. It's too expensive. Yes, *my* fellow's all right. Never saw a fitter chap. What? All right. Thanks, Miss Simkin," and Preston replaced the receiver.

"What does she say?" Martin asked.

"Well, they've appointed a fellow, but he's ill."

"Oh, they've appointed a fellow?"

"But he hasn't sailed yet! Really, Martin, I'm quite enjoying this. First job of work I've done for years. Half a mo'! Let's look up St. Saviour's Hospital. I'll do it. You stand by with the pennies. Or perhaps we'd better try him at home first. He may be at lunch. He's somewhere in Wimpole Street."

In a moment Preston was through to Briercroft's house. Sir James was at lunch, the butler said, but he would inform him.

"Hello, Sir James. Preston Daley speaking. Look, there's a friend of mine whose fiancée is in St. Saviour's at the moment. My friend is anxious about her. What's her name, Martin? Carol Tibbit. T-i-b-b-i-t. Yes. You don't know the case. No, she isn't being carved up. No, a sort of breakdown. That's it. Yes, he's a bit anxious. You'll look into the case. Thanks. But it isn't only that. He can't get along to see her during the day, and he wants to pop in on his way back from his work this evening. Can you fix it? It depends on the case. Well, I suppose it *could* be worked? No, she's not on the danger list as far as I know. Will you put in a word? Thanks. He'll be along this evening. His name? Bowling. Martin Bowling. Thanks. And when can I come down and see some operations? All right. I'll see you in the Club. Many thanks, Sir James. Good-bye."

Preston again replaced the receiver. Then he turned.

"That'll be all right," he said. "Briercroft will fix it."

Martin looked up then from his boots.

XV

“YOU HAVE EXCEEDED YOUR lunch hour by fifteen minutes, Mr. Bowling.”

“There was a big hold-up at Vauxhall.”

“I am not concerned with that. If you choose to lunch in the West End, the business of this branch is not going to suffer.”

“I was with Mr. Daley.”

“Who you were with does not concern me, either. You will stay late to-night and give Mr. Brown a hand.”

“I have to see someone who is ill.”

“When will you realize, Mr. Bowling,” and Mr. Drake was rapping his pince-nez irritably against his knuckles, “that your private affairs do not concern me in the least?”

“You stopped me going this afternoon. You are not going to stop me to-night!”

“Oh—I see?” and Mr. Drake sat back on his high stool.

“I see,” he said again.

“No!”

“Get back to your desk, Mr. Bowling!”

“I am going to the hospital this evening, Mr. Drake, and if there’s any work to be done I’ll come back here and do it afterwards!”

“You’ll do exactly as I tell you, Mr. Bowling!”

“You, or nobody else, can stop me!”

“Get back to your desk, Mr. Bowling!”

“When I’ve said what I’m going to say!”

“Get back to your desk!”

Martin was close to Mr. Drake now, as he stood, his muscles taught, facing his chief clerk.

"Mr. Bowling."

Martin turned to find Mr. Thistlewaite standing at his opened door.

"Come to my room," he said, quietly.

Martin looked up once more into the face of his Chief Clerk. Then he turned and walked slowly into Mr. Thistlewaite's office.

"Close the door, Bowling."

Martin obeyed, as Mr. Thistlewaite walked thoughtfully to his desk and sat down. Then he picked up his paper-knife and sat back in his chair.

"I overheard that little scene, Bowling."

"Yes, sir," and Martin noticed that the dampness at the bottom of his trousers seemed to have removed the polish entirely from his boots.

"I had to speak to you once before."

"I know, sir."

"I warned you then."

"I know, sir."

"A man like you, Bowling, who's been in the Army, should know what discipline means. Should know how to behave himself, too."

"People didn't bait me like that in the Army, Mr. Thistlewaite! They were *men* there! Perhaps if Mr. Drake hadn't sat at home, he might have learnt that, too!"

"Bowling, you can't talk to me like that!"

Martin raised his hands in a gesture of helpless despair.

"What's the good of my explaining, sir?" he said. "Must I lose every spark of self-respect when I work for this company? Here am I, trying to do my job and get business for the company, and all Mr. Drake does is to stand in my way and bait me at every turn. He's been like that ever since I was transferred. The first time I lost my temper was after

lunching with Mr. Preston Daley. Mr. Drake flew at me because I had not told him that you had given me permission to be away longer for lunch, Well, I was a bit excited that day, sir. I forgot. But I apologized afterwards. I just left the office hurriedly to keep the appointment."

"The day you first wore your new suit?"

"Yes, sir," Martin replied, aware that constant wear and rain had now removed all traces of newness from his three months old investment.

"Well, we can't go on like this, Bowling."

"I quite understand," Martin replied, after a pause. "I've already been after a new job."

"You have? Where?"

"With Mr. Daley."

"Oh," and Mr. Thistlewaite looked extremely thoughtful.

"But one thing I should like to say, sir, and that is this: I should have thought that a few minutes of the office time was well worth Mr. Daley's business. You told me to take time off, anyhow. Except for these three occasions, I haven't. I was only a quarter of an hour late to-day, too. But if Mr. Drake is going to treat me like this, sir, I can't go on. It takes all the pleasure out of my work. Besides, I've decided now that I want to leave here in any case."

"What are you thinking of doing?" and Mr. Thistlewaite was still leaning back in his chair.

Martin shrugged his shoulders again.

"I just want to get away," he said. "I want to get right away. That's all I'm thinking of doing at the moment. Mr. Daley is going to help me. If the job he has in mind doesn't come off, he's going to find me another."

"I see. How about his father's insurances?"

"Well, of course, if I stayed here, he'd try and get them transferred, I suppose. But we didn't talk business to-day."

"I see."

Martin looked again at his boots. Surprising, he thought.

The die is finally cast now. Yet I feel strangely unmoved. For the first time in my life I can speak to Drake as one man to another, and I shall have more to say to him before he leaves to-night. But I'll come back and do that work after I've seen Carol. I won't have Mr. Thistlewaite saying that I'm in the wrong. And until the end of the month, I'll carry on as before, and I'll do my job thoroughly. Then I'll clear out. No one will stop that. Preston is going to help me. He said so.

Mr. Thistlewaite looked up at last.

"I shall be very sorry to lose you, Bowling," he said. "Are you really sure you want to go? I mean, it's safe here, you know. Pension and so on."

"Yes, Mr. Thistlewaite. I made up my mind last night."

"Decisions are often altered," Mr. Thistlewaite smiled. "I shouldn't be too rash, you know. Wonderful opportunities in insurance, especially if you once get hold of the entire Daley business. It's worth thinking over, you know."

"No, I'm really handing in my notice now, sir."

"I should sleep on it for another night, Bowling. All big decisions need at least two nights' reflection," and Mr. Thistlewaite replaced his paper-knife on the desk.

"I've been thinking it over for the last two months," Martin replied.

"I see. Is it more money you're wanting? We might be able to pay you a little more, you know. I could put it up to Head Office."

"Yes. I want more money, Mr. Thistlewaite. But mostly, I want my self-respect."

"I don't understand," Mr. Thistlewaite said, looking up.

"No, sir. You wouldn't. It's my own idea. I've got to get away. That's my first task. I've thought it all out."

Still Mr. Thistlewaite sat. Once more he picked up his paper-knife.

"Would you like to have a little dinner to-night, Bowling?" he asked after a pause. "And talk things over."

"It's kind of you, sir. I can't. I've got to see someone in hospital."

"At night?"

"Well, Mr. Drake wouldn't give me time off to go during visiting hours, so Mr. Daley has arranged it. His father has just given a new wing to the hospital."

"I see."

"That's why I lost my temper just now, sir. Mr. Drake knows that I'm going to the hospital. That's why he's making me work late. That's the way he goes on all the time, I'm afraid."

"I see. Well, I'm sorry you can't have some dinner with me. Think over what I've said, anyhow. And ask Mr. Drake to come in."

"Yes, sir."

Martin turned on his heels, and walked out of the branch manager's office. An important day in his life indeed! Things were moving fast now! Mr. Thistlewaite had asked him to dinner! But the die was cast. . . .

"Mr. Thistlewaite wants you."

Mr. Drake removed his pince-nez, adjusted his coat, and walked into Mr. Thistlewaite's room.

"Well, what did I tell you?" Peter Thomas whispered on his return to the counter. "I warned you not to go too far. Now I suppose it's all up."

"Yes, Peter."

"Well, I'm sorry and no mistake. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know—yet."

Peter Thomas shook his head.

"I'm sorry and no mistake," he repeated. "Going at the end of the month?"

"Or before."

"Go on!"

"Don't alarm yourself, old friend. I gave *him* notice."

"You did *what*?"

"Yes, Peter. I resigned—just now."

Peter put down his pen into the grooved section of the desk.

"I don't understand," he said.

"No. I'll explain later."

Mr. Drake returned from the private office, and took his seat once more on his high stool. An atmosphere of tension descended upon the main office, each cough, or rustling of papers, seemed magnified a thousand times. Martin became aware of whisperings in corners behind his back, as he sat at the counter, a pen in his hand, his face flushed from the excitements of the last half-hour, his mind confused. But the day that he had planned was working out according to schedule. He had only to see Carol now and then it all would be over. Carol? A pathetic ending to the castles that he had built. He was aware again of that stifling sensation in his throat and of a mistiness before his eyes. But these things had to be removed entirely and half-measures were no good. Just as he had given his verbal resignation to Mr. Thistlewaite. That had not hurt him, though. Except for leaving old Peter Thomas, he would have little regret when the end of the month came. But to-night would be more difficult.

The afternoon wore slowly on. Except for whispered conversations with Peter Thomas, whose anxieties for Martin were not concealed, no further happenings marred the hitherto unruffled calm of the main office. Martin was a little apprehensive of what might transpire at five o'clock, when he would be leaving the office to see Carol, in spite of Mr. Drake's instructions to the contrary. But it was not fear that came into his thoughts over this question. It was a hope that dignities should not be lost. Mr. Drake always

made a point of attacking him in a loud voice in the main office, so that all should hear. Well, if Mr. Drake insisted on this practice, he must take the consequences. Some very hard things would be said to-night.

Shortly before closing time Mr. Howard called, and since he now transacted all his business with Martin—Miss Smith, Mr. Hilton, Norman and Mr. Thistlewaite had all left the office by the time that Mr. Howard had wished his bluff “Good night” and had disappeared through the porch, in his large tweed overcoat. Then Mr. Drake called Martin to the raised desk in the centre of the room.

“Mr. Bowling,” he said. “I find that it will not be necessary for you to stay late after all. There is less work to do than I anticipated.”

“I see.”

Mr. Drake replaced his pince-nez on to his large nose and picked up his pen. Martin stood for a moment watching his Chief Clerk’s pen splutter its way across some letters, before walking quickly to his desk and taking out his soap-tin and towel. Peter Thomas followed him into the cloak-room.

“What’s the idea?” Peter asked. “Change of tone, isn’t it?”

“I’ve an idea that Mr. Thistlewaite has spoken to him.”

“Go on! Why?”

“Well, I have,” Martin replied.

“You seem pretty cheerful, Martin—considering, I must say.”

“I’m not cheerful, Peter. And yet I am in a way. We’ve talked things over so often together over lunch. You know me as well as most people. But I doubt if even you could understand how I feel at this minute. It’s a sense of something won—and something lost.”

“Talking in riddles—eh?”

“Life *is* a riddle, Peter. You spend months trying to solve it and one day the answer comes to you. I found my answer

last night. It just came to me standing in front of my fireplace before I went to bed."

"Go on!"

"Yes. I decided then that I must get out of here."

"Then why did you stand that from Drake this morning?"

"I had my reasons."

Peter stood by the wash-basin, watching Martin cleaning an ink stain from his finger.

"It won't seem the same without you, Martin," he said.

"No. I'll miss you too, Peter."

"Any idea what you're going to do?"

"America—perhaps. The City—perhaps. I don't know—yet."

"Jobs flying at you—eh?"

"Well—I hope so."

"Not going to tell me?"

"Well, Peter. I've learnt one other thing, too. I'm not going to talk of things before they happen, again. That makes it so definite, doesn't it? It disappoints you so much if it doesn't come off."

"It's unlucky, they do say," Peter agreed, scratching his head.

"Still, you'll be the first one I'll tell," Martin said, drying his hands.

"Thanks, I'll be interested. Coming across to the corner before you go home?"

"No, Peter, I'm going straight to the hospital."

"Oh—I'd forgotten. Know the best way to get there?"

"Well, I'm going by bus. I want to sit on top and blow the cobwebs away."

"Well, you can get a bus at the Oval which should take you part of the way. One change ought to get you there."

"Yes. That's what I thought. You don't mind my not coming across to the corner? I don't want to arrive smelling of drink."

"No. I hadn't thought of that. Still, I'll just pop over. I'll drink to your success, Martin, while I'm there."

"Thanks, Peter."

"You never wear your bowler hat these days," Peter remarked, helping Martin on with his coat a moment later.

"No. I haven't worn it for some months now."

"Well, let's get along."

They passed once more into the main office and replaced their soap and towels into their respective desks. Then Peter Thomas drew out his newspaper, which he had carefully folded in the morning, and they left the office.

"Good night," came from Mr. Brown, working under a green lamp at his desk in the far corner.

No sound came from Mr. Drake.

"Good night," they both called and passed, arm-in-arm, through the porch and out into the street. They parted at the bus stop, Peter Thomas walking thoughtfully into the public-house on the corner; Martin, queuing up, even more thoughtfully, for his bus.

It had stopped raining. Martin climbed to the top and unbuttoned the canvas cover of the front seat, before sitting down. Things were happening quickly now. He had resigned! Mr. Thistlewaite had asked him to dinner! He had seen Preston. He was on his way to see Carol. The flowers? He had forgotten the flowers! Now, where would he get those? There was a shop near the Oval, so he had better get off there. In a moment he was alighting from the bus and hurrying to the florist's. Dark red roses? Yes, they had just a few left. Had they a dozen? Not quite. Well, put some of those white ones in, too. Wrap them carefully, please, pinning the paper at the top. Thank you. Now which bus would take him to the City? St. Saviour's was in the East End. Ah—this bus went to the Bank, so he had better get on here and then inquire. Once more on top of a bus, unbuttoning a canvas cover and sitting down. He had better

hold the roses, for the seat beside him was wet, although the night was clear now, and the street lamps seemed brighter than usual. There were not many people on top of this bus, although it was full inside, and he was thankful for that. It was good to be alone in the front here, away from the world, as he could think better. . . . Poor old Peter Thomas seemed quite upset just now. Yes, he would miss Peter and their daily lunches over the marble-topped table at the far end. He would miss Mr. Hilton, in a way, too. But that would soon pass. His biggest problem had yet to be faced. . . . And poor old Walter. He would miss him, too. But new surroundings would help to obliterate the memory of these five months. Even if America fell through and he worked in Daley's London office, he would still leave Linden Terrace, moving to another part of London, in that case. And, of course, Joyce would be married to Stanley Heavitree. Just mother and me left together, he thought. A pathetic ending to his plans, of course. And every time he dwelt upon that he became aware of a choking sensation in his throat. He was glad that no one was sitting near to him to witness his distress in the darkness of the front seat. But he must not grip this bunch of flowers so tightly, or they would spoil. His hands seemed very hot.

The bus rattled its way towards the City. How would he begin? What would he say? Of course, he would not tell her that this was "Good-bye" . . . He would just talk of trivial things and be near to her. . . . And presently he would get up from his chair. That would be the difficult part, the final leave-taking. Maybe by the time that Carol finally left the hospital, he would be three thousand miles away from Linden Terrace. . . . That was what Preston had said, three thousand miles.

The Bank. This is where he got off. He rose and walked down the steps and left the bus, inquiring the way from the

policeman on point duty. Any bus going up Cornhill would take him to St. Saviour's, he was informed.

Fifteen minutes later the doorman at the hospital was inquiring his business. No, he could not see patients at this hour of night. Two to four were visiting hours, displayed prominently enough on the board outside. Sir James Briercroft? No, he wasn't in the hospital. Who? Sir Algernon Daley? Never heard of him. What, the bloke who had given the new wing?

"Just a minute. You'd better see the Matron, if she's free. Wait there. What name did you say—Tibbit?"

"Yes. They'll know about my coming."

Martin waited. A clock ticked loudly on the wall behind him. He was reminded of his hospital days in the war. The indefinable smell of medicines, lint and floor-polish. Nurses passed to and fro. A telephone bell kept ringing. Presently the doorman returned with a nurse.

"Are you the gentleman Sir James Briercroft telephoned about?" she asked.

"Yes. I've come to see Miss Tibbit."

"This way."

Martin followed the nurse down a long corridor, holding his flowers tightly in his hand, and presently they came to a large ward and the nurse was opening the door. At the far end, one bed stood alone surrounded by a red silk screen, a sign that Martin knew so well. That signified—Death. Shortly, the authorities would, as discreetly as possible, be taking that body away, so that the other patients should not know. . . . He followed the nurse, his boots resounding heavily on the polished floor, reaching the bed with the red screen, which the nurse parted, motioning Martin inside. A moment of indescribable fear. Then he quietly obeyed.

"You must not stay long," the nurse whispered, before rearranging the screen and departing.

Martin approached the bed, the flowers held tightly in his hands.

A pause. An unforgettable pause.

"Hello, Martin."

"Hello, Carol."

Martin drew slowly nearer to the bed.

"I've brought you these," he said, opening the white paper wrapping.

"They're lovely, Martin."

"Where shall I put them?"

"Put them there. Nurse will see to them."

"Yes."

He walked to the table, placing his roses by her bedside.

"Are you better, Carol?"

She lay quietly in her iron bed, her white and emaciated arms outside the coverlet, her fair hair drawn back from her forehead in slight disorder on the pillow. She did not move.

"What time is it?" she asked. "I can't see the clock from here."

"About a quarter to seven."

"Oh."

"May I sit beside you, Carol?"

"Yes. There is a chair there."

Martin drew the chair to the bed and sat down, placing his felt hat on the floor beside him. She was near to him now. He took her hand.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked.

"Yes. I am quite comfortable, Martin."

Her voice seemed softer than before, and her eyes seemed tired and the laughter seemed to have gone from them entirely. Her hand was cold.

"How long will you be here?" he asked.

She shook her head wearily.

"I don't know," she answered. "The days just go on, one after the other. Just waiting."

"For what?"

Again she shook her head wearily. Her lips seemed dry. She moistened them. Then she closed her eyes. How beautiful she looked, Martin thought. Her pallor seemed even to increase her loveliness. But her face was drawn. A new expression. Martin watched her anxiously, as she lay with closed eyes on the pillow. So near to her. . . . Yet so far away. . . . A vague sense of eau de Cologne. . . . Still holding her hand.

Moments were now passing in silence. . . .

"Joyce is engaged," he said.

"Is she?"

"Being married quite soon."

"It must be wonderful to know happiness like that, Martin."

Why could he find so little to say? Carol's eyes were still closed, her voice so soft, that it became almost a whisper.

"I lunched with Preston to-day."

"How is he? Still gay—and beautiful, Martin?"

"Yes. He's always the same. Not many like that, are there?"

"No—not now."

Time seemed to be slipping away, and still so little had been said. These recurring pauses in their conversation added to the strain of this interview. But he would not tell her his plans. He must just slip quietly away after this meeting had ended.

"It was sweet of you to come," she said presently, opening her eyes. "We two rebels!" and he felt the pressure of her fingers as a slow smile came to her lips, only to fade as quickly as it came. "Are you still a rebel?"

"Yes, Carol. I'm a real rebel now."

Again a smile passing, and her eyes closing once more.

"Are *you*?"

"Yes, Martin. I'll be a rebel—always."

"Something snaps, doesn't it?"

"Yes—something snaps."

Now the friendly grasp had gone from her fingers, and her hand was lying limply in his.

"Do you remember all our talks, Martin?"

"Yes, Carol. All of them."

"The castles we used to build?"

"Yes."

"Don't build your castles too high. They may crash—like mine."

"Yes. Mine have crashed, too."

A pause.

"I'm so sorry. You're too nice to be hurt. I've so often thought of you, lying here."

"You have!"

"Yes. Daddy always wished that he had a son like you. I wish he had, too."

How large his boots seemed as he looked at them again. . . . How shoddy they were, now that the bottoms of his trousers had rubbed away the polish. . . . How hot his hands as they held the beautiful coolness of Carol's. . . . But he was near to her. . . . Yet that could not be for much longer now. . . . But he must stay close to her until the end.

"Dear Martin," she said presently. "I'm so sorry about your plans."

"I am, too. Still, these things happen. Just got to stick your chin out."

"Yes. Only it's hard to *keep* it there, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"But we've both got to do it. Others expect it of us. We can't give way."

"No."

"Have you seen Daddy to-day?"

"Yes."

"Mummy seemed so upset yesterday."

"Naturally. She loves you, Carol."

"Yes. I'm lucky to have parents like that. I know they'll be kind to me."

"But, of course. . . ."

Again her eyes had closed.

"Martin. What time is it?" she whispered, after a long silence.

"It's nearly seven."

"Do you mind if you leave me, now. I want to be alone."

"Tired?"

"A little."

Everything became confused in his mind. He longed to take her into his arms, to tell her of the emotions that were surging, at that moment, through his slim body, and to cover her lips with the unfulfilled kisses of his life. But he could not do those things; he realized that. Besides, one must not give way. Carol had said that, too. He must keep his chin out instead. . . . He might just raise that cool hand to his lips. . . . No, perhaps he had better just lean down and kiss the hand tenderly, as it lay in his. His lips had never touched her body before. . . .

"Dear Martin!" she sighed, as he rose, leaving a white hand on the coverlet.

He was standing now, looking down at the pale face on the pillow. The moment had come! . . . He saw a figure picking up the letters from the door-mat . . . like a Shepperson drawing . . . turning . . . smiling. . . . Now she seemed asleep. . . .

"Good-bye, Carol," he whispered, at last.

A pause.

"Good-bye, Martin."

She seemed unaware of his presence now, as if she had

fallen suddenly asleep. A neighbouring clock had just chimed seven. Martin looked down once more. Then he turned away, and parting the red silk screen, he walked slowly from the silent ward, treading softly lest he should wake her, his felt hat gripped tightly in his hand, his vision blurred. He closed the door, and walked out into the street.

To keep the appointment that Preston had arranged for him with Sir James Briercroft, Martin decided to forego his own lunch. He would just have time, in the hour, to arrive at Wimpole Street, have his consultation with Sir James and return to Camberwell Green. He wished, above all else, to know that everything possible would be done for Carol, after he had gone.

Two days after his first visit to the hospital, he left his office without any argument from his Chief Clerk and hastily clambered on to an omnibus bound for Oxford Circus, there to change into another, entailing but a short walk to the great surgeon's house. He arrived punctually, and was ushered into a beautifully furnished room, awaiting his summons into the consulting-room behind. Sir James did not keep him waiting. In a moment he was shaking hands with a man whom he remembered seeing at the Porchester Club on his first visit.

"Good morning. You're young Preston Daley's friend?" the bald-headed man smiled.

"Yes, sir."

"Sit down, my boy. Your fiancée is in St. Saviour's?"

"Er—yes."

Sir James sat down also. He sat in a large chair at the other side of a carved oak desk. Martin was aware of signed photographs of high personages and a sense of richness about the room.

"Of course, it isn't my case, you understand, but young Preston has asked me to look into it."

"Yes, sir."

Sir James Briercroft became thoughtful. He sat with his hands folded before him on the desk.

"I'm worried, sir," Martin said. "I saw her two days ago."

"There is no cause for alarm, my boy," Briercroft said. "The case is proceeding quite normally. Of course, her nerves are in a bad state. But then, these things are always a shock to a young girl. But otherwise there is no cause for alarm, that I can see."

"But how long will it *be*, sir?"

"The child should be born about the beginning of September, I understand," Briercroft replied, his hands still folded on the desk.

Martin became aware that the silver inkstand in front of the surgeon's hands was assuming different shapes. The dome of one lid seemed now like St. Paul's. Now it had changed again, reminding him of a German helmet. The steel nib of the pen looked now like a bayonet. The ink in the opened well was blood. . . .

"But everything appears to be going normally," he heard Briercroft saying. "Of course, her mental state is a complication, but I have recommended a new course of treatment. There is no need for you to worry, my boy. Of course," he added, "I don't know what you two young people have in mind, but if I might suggest a cure for the nervous condition, I should not delay getting married too long. You must understand the mental condition of an unmarried mother. As I say, I do not know what you two young people have in mind, but the time is getting on. A seven-months child is not uncommon. I think there is no question that this anxiety has much to do with her present condition."

"I see," Martin replied, his eyes riveted on the opened ink-well.

"But as far as St. Saviour's is concerned, she will have every possible attention and I, personally, will keep an eye on her."

"Thank you, sir."

"But I should think over my suggestion, my boy. Are you in a good job?"

"Oh, yes."

"No complications your side?"

"No, sir—none."

"Well, young Preston asked me to talk to you like a father, and I have," Briercroft added, after a pause. "The way I'd talk to my own son."

Martin's eyes left the ink-well and moved to the great surgeon's face. There was a kindly smile there. It reassured. It brought back some semblance of sanity to his mind. He rose, a little unsteadily, from his chair.

"Thank you," Martin said, holding firmly to the chair back.

Briercroft rose, too.

"So don't worry, my boy. She'll be well taken care of."

Martin found himself shaking the surgeon's hand for the second time.

"And good luck," Briercroft added. "You've chosen a very attractive wife, if I may say so."

Martin became aware once more of a kindly smile from the tall man, who had now walked to his side of the desk and whose hand was now on his shoulder.

"But don't delay matrimony too long. Once she knows about that, I think you will find a decided improvement in her health generally. It's only natural, you know. Put yourself in her place."

"Yes."

"But she'll have every possible attention."

"Thank you."

"Good luck, my boy."

"Thank you, sir."

Martin turned, walked slowly from the consulting-room and closed the door. A manservant in the hall helped him on with his overcoat and handed him his felt hat.

"Good day, sir," the manservant said, at the door.

"Good day."

Martin walked down one step, turned to the left, and found himself walking south. His feet seemed to drag behind him. All joy seemed to have gone suddenly from his life. Nothing mattered now. His office in Camberwell Green, which he would be leaving at the end of the month, seemed a world apart—a world of small people and small happenings. He was standing alone now. No one could help him. The cup of bitterness had been placed to his lips and he had drained it to the last drop. There could be no pain after this. Just a numbness that he must know always. He put his hands into the pockets of his overcoat and walked doggedly on. . . . He had better go to see Preston. . . . No, Preston must never know. Doctors did not discuss these things. . . .

He found himself at Oxford Circus. The clock over the jeweller's shop told him that it was twenty minutes to two. The visiting hours were two till four. If only he could talk to Preston! But that could never be. He must settle this alone. His feet dragged behind him as he walked, his wide-opened eyes seeing nothing as he forced his way through the crowded pavement. His resolve to carry out his obligations to the Atlantic until the end of the month did not exist any more. Nothing existed in his mind now, save the news that he had just received. It was as if his blood had been drained suddenly from his body. He stood for a moment, leaning against a doorway.

"Feeling all right?"

"Yes. I'm all right."

"Sure?"

Martin nodded.

The policeman walked slowly on, glancing behind him. Martin clenched his hands, which were again in the pockets of his overcoat, and walked on towards Piccadilly Circus.

He must go to the hospital at once. Carol was worried; Sir James had said so. The figure that he had seen stooping over the mat to pick up the letters, the vision that he had carried so vividly in his mind for the last five months, was no more. Someone had entered like a thief into his world and had destroyed it utterly. But he must see Carol. In her hour of trial she must turn to him. It would be wonderful to be able to render her some service. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Martin," she had said at the party. "You won't be without me, Carol," he muttered. "I'm coming to you now."

His eyes were dimmed. He swallowed quickly and walked on, his felt hat on his head. Dear God! If he could only handle this situation as Preston would and not as one of the small men in his office at Camberwell Green! No fuss. Quietly. Tactfully. Gracefully. Just like Preston. But how? If only God would show him how! He supported himself again, leaning against the glass window of a tobacconist's, before running across Piccadilly Circus into its terrifying traffic, which seemed to rush at him from all sides. He found himself a moment later, in front of one of the flower women sitting beneath Eros' temporarily vacated home in the centre of the Circus. Flowers? Yes, he must take her flowers. They might bring some comfort to her at this time. Violets, sir? Yes, violets. Two large bunches. Wrap them carefully, please. . . . The roar of the traffic around him grew more terrifying, and he had to cross the road once more before boarding his omnibus. He glanced round nervously, whilst the flower woman, in her black straw hat, wrapped up the two bunches of violets. Then he paid her, and clutching the

flowers, he ran across the road, reaching the Pavilion Theatre opposite as a taxi-cab, with grinding brakes, drew up behind him. He ignored the cursing of the driver and walked doggedly on. . . . Steady! Keep a cool head! Never mind the crowds on the pavement. Get on a bus bound for the City. It's easier to think on the front seat of an omnibus. But plans? He must have plans! He could not walk into that ward until some sanity had returned to him. . . . The bus was already on its way down Fleet Street. The journey would not take long. . . . He would be seeing Carol in a few moments now. . . .

Martin sat huddled in his seat. The newspaper offices, as he passed, bristled with activity as he caught glimpses of them through the first-floor windows. News? What news could there be in the world beside this? The rest of the world did not exist any more. The people in the street below were marionettes. St. Paul's Cathedral was a stage setting, as he viewed it from the archway at Ludgate Circus. It was utterly unreal. So was the conversation of the people around him. And time was passing too quickly. His mind and body seemed deadened. Perhaps it would be better if he got off at the Bank and walked to the hospital. He might think more clearly if some portion of his body were in action. Carol? What could he say to her? This question drummed, unanswered, through his brain as he sat clutching the bunches of violets in his moist hands. At the Bank he rose from his seat and left the omnibus. The pavement was crowded. Black-coated clerks were returning cheerfully from their lunch. He passed the Head Office of the Atlantic Insurance Company without being seen by any of his former colleagues, and he was grateful for that; he would have found talking difficult, just then. He threaded his way eastwards, staring resolutely before him. Carol? *What could he say to her?* He was getting nearer to the hospital now with every step, but no plan was yet formed in his mind. His brain seemed in-

capable of performing its normal functions, and the crowds on the pavements interrupted the slow trend of his thoughts, confusing him further. He felt infinitely tired. He had had no lunch. Perhaps if he sat for a moment in one of the fast-emptying tea-shops he might feel better. He found himself passing a Lyons café, and he pushed the glass door savagely and walked through. People were leaving to return to their offices; a few still remained.

"It's nice to have it dry for a change, isn't it?" the waitress remarked, making out his check some moments later.

"Yes."

"It's been a rotten winter, hasn't it?"

"It has."

"But we'll have the spring here before we know where we are, I suppose," she added, placing the bill by his side, and leaving the table with a smile.

Martin watched her move across the floor and attend to another customer. The spring! How far away that seemed! Days—dreary days of rain and disappointment, false hopes and despair. That is all that now seemed to have existed in his life—ever. By the spring, he would be in America, three thousand miles away from Linden Terrace. . . . But Carol would still be there. . . . Her baby was being born in September! . . . Did he realize the full significance of what Sir James Briercroft had just told him? . . . Shortly, the neighbours would be pointing at her as she walked up the street! . . . That's what they would be doing! . . . Bert and Ethel Freeman, Fred and Mrs. Potter, Mr. George, even, from the Reindeer . . . pointing at her as an outcast! . . . *Carol!* . . . It was hideous, utterly hideous!

He buried his face in his hands as he sat in the fast-emptying café. . . . What was his own grief beside this? . . . He pressed his fingers tightly to his temples. . . . No, he must not give way. . . . He must face this as Preston

would and not as one of the small men in his office. . . . He raised his head slowly to find the waitress approaching his table again. She smiled once more as she passed him, carrying an assortment of empty cups on her tray. A large woman in a black dress was busily engaged behind a mahogany counter. There were only two men in the café now, playing dominoes, in the corner. There seemed a sudden quietness in the room. Martin, through the glass door, watched the panorama of the street with heavy eyes; the hurrying figures; the street cleaner; the buses; the moving traffic; the Post Office van; the traffic block caused by a dray-horse falling, a tall City policeman coming efficiently to its aid; the newspaper van drawing up and delivering a bundle of papers to the seller outside the café door, disappearing as quickly as it came; a Bank messenger passing, in his tall silk hat. . . .

Twenty minutes later Martin rose. He left the table, paid his bill and pushed open the glass door. He turned to the right, his bunches of violets in their creased white paper, held tightly in his hand, his boots resounding heavily on the pavement as he hurried his footsteps towards St. Saviour's Hospital. A different nurse was escorting him, some moments later, down the long corridor to the ward.

"Hello, Martin."

He approached the bed, as the nurse rearranged the red silk screen. His roses of two nights ago were in the vase by her bedside. Martin thought, as he moved towards her, that her expression seemed more strained to-day, her pallor increased.

"I've brought you these," he said, at last.

"How sweet of you, Martin."

"Shall I put them here?"

"Yes—put them there."

He placed the violets near the vase on the table by her side.

"Is it raining still?"

"No, Carol. It isn't raining."

"Bring up the chair as you did the other night," she said. "And hold my hand, as you did then. Will you? It's so lonely here," she added.

A silence fell upon them, as their hands lay together on the counterpane.

"Are you so lonely, Carol?"

She sighed and shook her head before turning away, but Martin noticed that her eyes had filled suddenly with tears.

"Carol."

"Yes?"

"I've got it all planned out."

"What?"

"Everything."

She closed her eyelids on her tears. Neither spoke for a moment. Martin could hear the clock ticking on the wall of the ward, the murmur of whispered conversations from the other beds, the soft movement of people, the sudden high-pitched grating of a chair moving on the wooden floor, a bell ringing.

"I am going to America," he said, at last.

A pause.

"When?"

"In two weeks. You are coming, too," he added.

"How, Martin?"

"It's the only way out, Carol. I love you, you see. I know everything. I heard just now. You can't stay behind. Linden Terrace and the neighbours will talk. You couldn't bear that. Nor could I."

"You know, then?" she whispered, looking at him for the first time.

"Yes, Carol. I know. I just heard. I came to you straight away."

Her eyes seemed now to be examining their hands, intertwined on the counterpane.

"It's dear of you," she was saying. "But I couldn't do that, Martin. I can never thank you, though, for saying that to me."

"But don't you see, Carol, the neighbours will talk! It will be impossible!"

"Why do you say that?" she asked, after a moment.

"They will, Carol! They'll talk! I couldn't bear it!"

She smiled sadly.

"That you should say that, too!"

"What?"

"Someone once said that to me before," she whispered.

Martin felt the sudden coolness of Carol's other hand resting on his.

"I could never let you do that, Martin. Yet it has made me feel so proud. You will never know what that has meant to me."

"But I love you, Carol."

Their eyes met then, and held each other for a long time.

"You must love me very much," she said, still looking at him.

"There is nothing else that matters to me, now."

"How long have you loved me, Martin?"

"I think—since I first saw you in the hall, the day after we moved in. Do you remember?"

"Yes, Martin, I remember."

"I meant to tell you when you came back from Budapest. But, of course, I didn't know then—about this."

"Martin," she said, speaking very slowly. "All that—has ended. That was *my* castle, you see. But it was snatched from me suddenly. I've been lying here ever since. Oh, Martin! The appalling loneliness!"

She removed one hand from his, then, and held it before her eyes.

"I know that loneliness, too, Carol," he said.

"I'm sorry to behave like this. The days just go by. Each day is further away from him. I shall never see him again. I meant to tell you everything before. You were the only one who could have understood. I always knew that. But it would have hurt you, if you'd known. I see that now. Perhaps it was as well."

"If it will help you to talk. . . ."

"I couldn't hurt you—purposely."

"The thing is done now. It's finished, you say."

Carol lay back on her pillow. Presently she removed her hand from her eyes, and said:

"Pass me a clean handkerchief, Martin, will you? They're over there. Perhaps it *would* help me if I talked about it," she sighed, as Martin returned.

"It often does, Carol, if something's inside like that—and hurts."

"Yes."

Martin was again by her side. Carol blew her nose very softly, and lay twisting the lace handkerchief between her fingers.

"I can't go on like this, I suppose," she whispered, as a tear trickled again slowly down her cheek. "I can't just lie in the darkness, searching vainly for him. It can't go on like that. One day I'll have to face my responsibilities, I suppose. Yes, Martin, I think I would like to talk about it, if it wouldn't hurt you. I have never spoken of it before. Don't look at me, though, will you? Just sit holding my hand, as you were just now."

Martin, one hand in hers, sat looking down once more at his boots, the pattern of which had now become imprinted on his mind—the dent in the right toe-cap that he had caught in the lift gates of the Underground; the enamel that had worn off the third eyelet of his left boot, exposing its original bright metal and increasing his shabbiness; the lace of the right boot, which was fraying and which would

need renewing. . . . And Carol was speaking quietly. He could not listen. It hurt so. But it would help her to talk about it. Sometimes his mind was arrested. Paris, Budapest, Robin—dear, sweet, darling Robin. But she had nothing left now, she was saying. Only a beautiful memory. Yes, a ring. She had that. But not even a photograph! How that had hurt! She had thought of asking his wife to send one to her, but her courage had failed. . . . Yes, she did have one other thing. A little frock. She had brought it with her to the hospital. . . . And she had fought so hard during the day-time, since she had been here. At night, she had sobbed uncontrollably, beneath the clothes of her bed. The loneliness. . . . Then the knowledge of her condition. . . . She was not sure at first. Her pride when she really knew! Could there be a more beautiful legacy of their love than this? It was to be her secret. . . . Her rude awakening! The examinations by the doctors at the hospital! Their discovery! The questions—the awful questionings!

“And then Mummy and Daddy came to see me,” she added, softly.

“Yes.”

“It brought me to earth, Martin. It seemed to shatter everything. Fears! Sordid, material fears! The neighbours, the gossip, just as you—and he—had said. I felt so sorry, suddenly, for my parents. I was proud before. Daddy is so poor now, too. And I can’t work—not for a long time. I felt humiliated, Martin. There seemed nothing that could be done. The easiest way out was to die.”

“No, Carol. We’ve got to put our chins out. It’s expected of us.”

“Yes. But it’s difficult, Martin.”

A silence again. New visitors seemed to be arriving in the ward. A woman in the far corner was crying.

“I have purposely told you my position,” he heard Carol say. “I am penniless. I could only bring you further responsi-

bilities. Don't you see how I couldn't let you do this—now?"

"That, Carol, is the very reason why you should," he said.

"No, Martin dear. Besides, you have your own way to make in the world. You can't be shouldered with—us. But it's very dear of you."

Martin looked up.

"Carol," he said. "You have brought things down to fundamentals. Let me. I am going to America. I'll be lost there. I'll be nervous, shy, ill-at-ease. I know that. But I wouldn't—with you. I could face things with you. We could build a new life together. Although I put on a brave front at home about America, I know that I'm frightened. Until I met you, Carol, I was just one of the little men. I did not understand responsibility. I did not understand the life of authority. You taught me that—you and Preston. But I'm not strong enough to stand on my own feet, yet. That has been proved to me during these last weeks. I need you, Carol. I need you terribly. I love you, too, as I can imagine no other love to be. I had decided, two days ago, to run away from you. When I came to see you last, it was to say 'Good-bye.' I had planned it so. It was my first effort at standing on my own feet. But it was a failure, Carol. A complete failure. I, too, have cried at night in my room. I am not ashamed to own that. You were *my* castle, you see. I had decided to crash it to the ground and to start building another, abroad. But there was no inspiration. I was lost. I had no ideas. That is how it has been with me, Carol. When I heard the news an hour ago, I was stunned. I lost control again. I became demented, almost. Seeing you again has made me long to have a child. No one will ever know. We shall be in America, then. Besides, we're rebels, you and I. We're searching adventure. There will be adventure in America. We could never find that at home, Carol—now."

"Martin," she said, after a long pause.

“Yes?”

“It is so hard for me to say this to you. I purposely told you the other—first.”

“Yes?”

“There have been two men in my life that I really respected.”

“Yes?”

“The other one was you.”

Martin leant down suddenly and kissed the hand on the pillow. His head remained there. He became aware of a cool hand caressing his hair.

“Martin?”

“Yes?”

“Will you come back as you did the other night? About seven o’clock. And sit with me for a while?”

XVI

A FORTNIGHT LATER GREAT preparations had taken place in Linden Terrace. Millicent Tibbit had spent many days in the kitchen, cooking. The Potters' tea-urn had been borrowed and polished by Walter, so that a slightly distorted reflection of his face could be seen on its curved sides. Number Five became a hive of industry. The only member of that household who was not working feverishly during this time was Mrs. Bowling, who still lay quietly in the back bedroom at the top of the house, under Dr. Oliver's care. There had been many celebrations at the Reindeer, with Fred Potter, Bert Freeman, Mr. George and Walter Tibbit drinking frequently to the health of young Martin Bowling, as they stood up at the bar. Joyce had been most helpful over the trousseau, putting Carol into touch with various wholesale firms. Bert Freeman had generously sent over four bottles of pre-war whisky for the wedding breakfast.

It had been a disappointment to Walter that the wedding service had to take place in a Register Office, as there had not been time to put up the banns before Martin was due to sail for America. But as he pointed out to Preston in the downstairs front room during the wedding breakfast, as he fought his way through the guests to offer him a glass of champagne from the case that he had sent, "The Registrar seemed a nice fellow, didn't he, Mr. Daley? Everything went off very nicely. Your health, sir. Very kind of you, I'm sure. As nice a glass of champagne as I've tasted," and he smacked his lips very loudly.

The crowd in the front room after the wedding was bigger

than that on the night of the party. Preston Daley and Peter Thomas were both present, the former having acted in the capacity of best man, and the latter enjoying himself considerably, his red hair seeming to stand more on end than ever in his excitement. In addition, Emily Jones had been specially invited. Otherwise, they were all there—Fred and Mrs. Potter, Ethel and Bert Freeman, Uncle Henry, Walter and Millicent Tibbit, and Joyce and Stanley Heavitree, about whom Walter remarked in a loud aside, as he carried round a bottle of Preston's champagne:

"He *is* having a drop to-day. Hope it doesn't rot his inside."

Martin laughed, looking down proudly at his new shoes.

"Stanley's all right," he said. "Besides, he can't drink our health to-day in lemonade."

"I wouldn't put anything past that fellow!" Walter muttered, noticing Ethel Freeman's empty glass and walking over, hastily, to refill it.

Everyone remarked upon the charm of Preston Daley, especially Millicent, who, standing with her back to the granite clock, and clad in her grey silk dress with the black spots, carried on a long, if somewhat wheezy, conversation with him, extolling the virtues of the gay 'nineties, a glass of champagne continuously in her hand.

Walter was resplendent in a frock-coat with silk facings and wide braid. It was, as he made a point of explaining to everyone, the same coat in which he had married Millicent twenty-eight years before. His brown cloth spats had been specially cleaned with benzine, too. His grey wisp of hair was carefully brushed across his head and heavily pomaded, so that it lay glued to his scalp, and his eyes were laughing merrily behind his gold spectacles. At moments, it is true, a mistiness came to them, when he found himself standing alone, but such moments were fleeting. He would quickly find some guest with an empty glass then, and

his hospitality and conversation would flow warmly once more.

Bert Freeman's loud voice penetrated the house as he made his speech, inviting the guests to drink to the health of the young couple, and his remarks were loudly applauded on all sides, especially by Walter, who, in his own speech, laid particular stress on the sterling qualities of his new son-in-law. He ended his remarks on the only note of pathos of this eventful day.

"It is a great day for Mother and me," he said, one hand on the silk lapel of his frock-coat, the other holding a glass of champagne. "But it is a sad one, too. A few months ago we were a happy house here—as happy as any in this street. But tragedy came to us at Christmas, as you all know." He paused for an instant before continuing, coughing nervously. "The floor above is empty now," he said. "Next week, ladies and gentlemen, the top floor will be empty, too. We shall then be having another celebration. Joyce, here, and my—er—friend Mr. Heavitree, will also be entering the holy bonds. There will only be Mother and me left then." He paused again, looking into his wine-glass. "But," he continued, "there is one message that I should like to give to these young people who are so shortly to leave for foreign parts, and that is this: They must not worry over Mother and me. They are leaving us in good hands, as they will see from to-day's festivities. They are leaving us with friends who are companionable. That, ladies and gentlemen, is a fine quality. And before terminating these few remarks, I would like you to charge your glasses and drink to the health of one of the most companionable young fellows you could meet in a day's march—my son-in-law, Mr. Martin Bowling!"

"Hear! Hear!" came from all sides.

Walter hurriedly swallowed his champagne and stood looking at the empty glass, to find Bert and Ethel Freeman at his side.

"Well spoken, old friend," Bert said, slapping him heartily on the back.

"Thanks, Bert."

"You couldn't have done it better, Walter," Ethel agreed.

"Well, it's the least one can do," Walter replied, still looking into his glass. "Got to give them a nice send-off, you know."

"Well, Walter, you've certainly done *that* all right," Ethel said.

"Yes, it's a nice finish up to a bad winter," Bert pointed out, "a little celebration like this."

"Yes, Bert. Still, we've got the spring to look forward to now, I suppose. The garden, and so on."

Stanley Heavitree, in a new cravat, was daintily handing round pieces of wedding cake on a plate, and he approached them in his best professional manner.

"For you, madam?" he asked, beamingly. "For you, sir?"

"No, thanks," Walter replied, turning away. "Never eat it."

"But you must eat some wedding cake," Ethel pointed out.

"And the almond icing is delicious, sir," Stanley Heavitree continued. "I highly recommend it."

Walter turned.

"*Almonds?*" he said. "Well, perhaps I will take a bit, then," and, after helping himself to a piece of the cake, he walked over to Millicent's side.

"A fine speech, sir," Preston smiled, as he stood at the mantelpiece.

"Could have said a lot more. Didn't like to take up the time, though. Time's getting on, Mother," he said, opening his frock-coat and drawing out his gold watch.

"Are you coming to the station?" Preston asked.

"No," Walter replied, after a pause. "Always have before, though. Never missed seeing anyone off. Couldn't face it

to-day, somehow. Think I'll just stay behind quietly with Mother," and he stood looking thoughtfully at his watch.

Martin and Carol joined the group at the fireplace.

"I'm just going upstairs to see my mother," Martin said. "Carol has already said good-bye."

"And will you come down with me, Mums, while I dress?" Carol asked, her hand still lingering in Martin's.

Millicent hurriedly replaced her glass on the mantelpiece, smoothed out her dress, and wiped her lips.

"Of course, dear."

"I've just been explaining to Mr. Tibbit," Preston said, when the men were alone, "that I'll be keeping my eye on you both when I come over in June."

"Yes, that's going to be fun, Preston!"

"But I haven't told him yet," Preston smiled, "that I think his daughter is a darling."

"Very kind of you, sir," Walter replied, slowly. "Only one we had, you know. Nice to know she's so happy. Still . . ." But he said no more. Instead, he put away his watch, and with the remaining bottles of Preston's champagne, he became again the perfect host.

Martin left the front room, then, and climbed the stairs to his mother's bedroom, sitting by her bedside until Bert Freeman called lustily up the staircase to inform him that the taxi was at the door.

"You must be going, son," she said, quietly.

A moment of intense anguish, and he was walking down the stairs to find Walter ensuring that all the guests were liberally supplied with confetti and rice; Bert Freeman was tying one of Walter's old bedroom slippers to the number-plate of the cab. Carol came up the basement stairs at that moment.

"Martin," she whispered breathlessly. "You and I are the ones that *really* belong. I know that now. I had no pattern with Robin," and she held tightly to his hand.

"Come on!" Walter cried, at the door. "No time for courting. The taxi's waiting. Strike up the accordion, Bert!"

There was much laughter. *The Wedding March* was played by Bert on his accordion, and in a moment Carol and Martin were hurrying, under a shower of confetti and rice, to the waiting cab. The cheering and strains of Bert's music followed them up the street. At the corner, Martin turned to have one last glimpse through the window. The guests, he noticed, were still standing in the street, waving heartily. Away from the rest stood the lonely figures of Walter and Millicent Tibbit, his arm through hers, his other hand holding a large handkerchief, which he was waving very slowly. Then the taxi passed the church on the corner, and Linden Terrace disappeared from view.

THE END